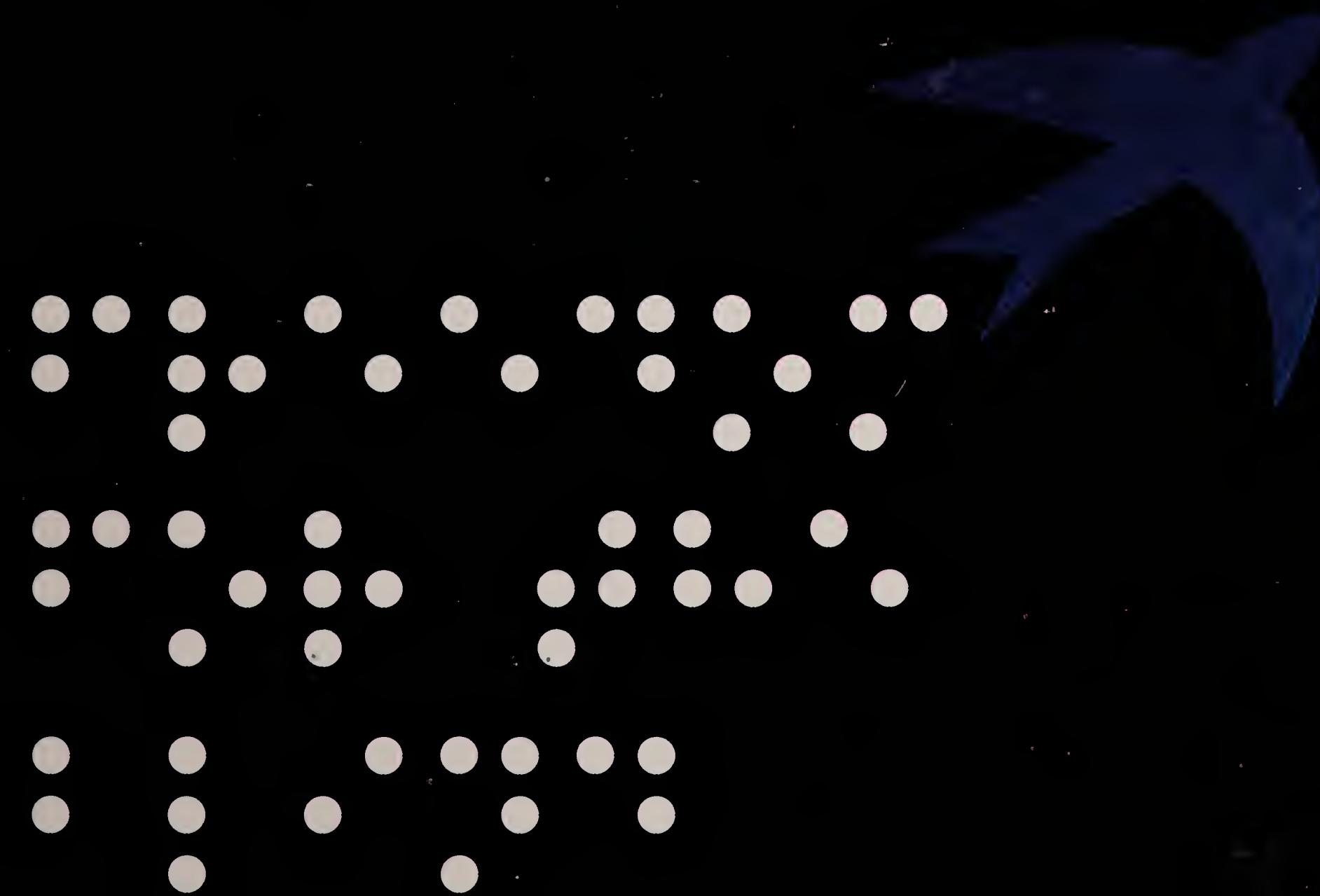


FREEDOM FOR THE BLIND

THE SECRET IS EMPOWERMENT

By James H. Omvig



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CRITICAL CONCERNS IN BLINDNESS SERIES

A Research Project of the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness

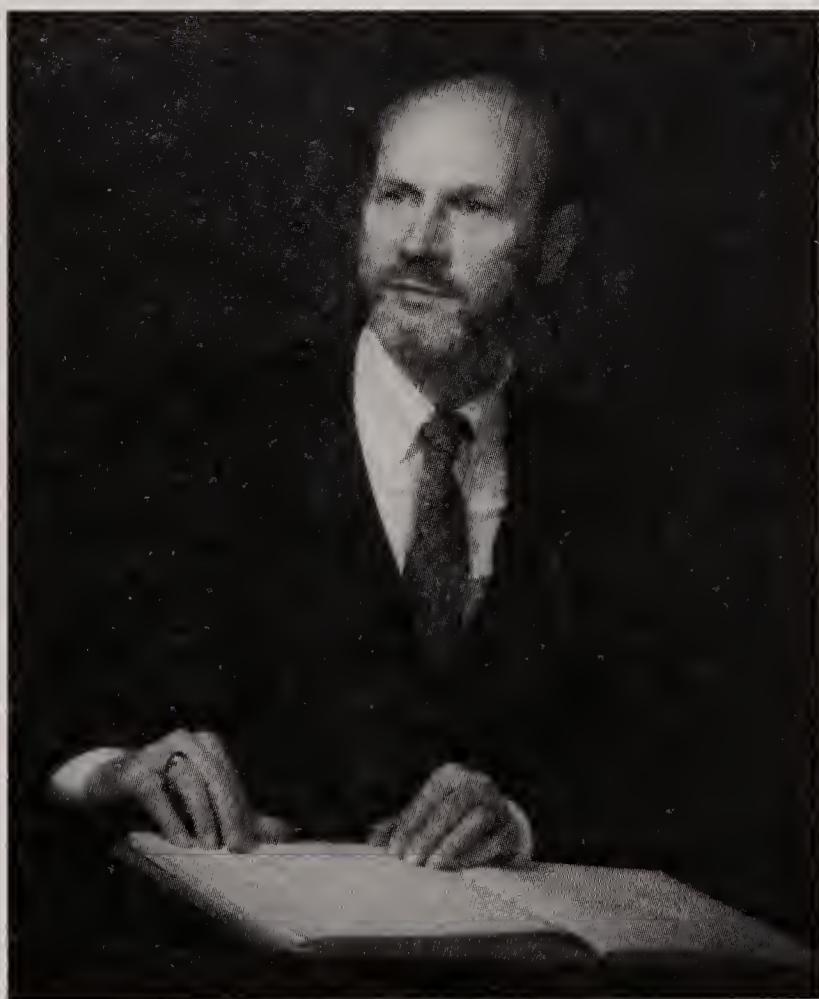
The Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness is a collaborative endeavor between Louisiana Tech University and the Louisiana Center for the Blind. The Institute was established in 1999 to provide leadership in the creation of programs and conducting research which recognizes the socially constructed assumptions underpinning the current structure of the blindness system. Scholars and professionals will operate from a theoretical framework that takes into consideration the socially constructed beliefs about blindness, thus viewing blindness from a more positive perspective. As a result, the Institute will provide alternative programs and research that will expand the boundaries of the field.

The mission of the Institute is to advance the blindness field by providing the blind and professionals serving the blind with innovative programs, and conducting meaningful research that will empower blind people to live independent and productive lives.

This book is the second in the series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James H. (Jim) Omvig is a blind attorney and rehabilitation professional from Tucson, Arizona. Before his retirement, he spent the major part of his professional career in work with the blind, and he continues to do consulting, evaluating, writing and teaching in this field today.



Jim Omvig became blind as a teenager due to Retinitis Pigmentosa (a degenerative, retinal disease referred to as RP). After several years of struggling with extremely limited vision while in the public school system, he transferred to a residential school, the Iowa School for the Blind. He graduated from high school in 1953.

Eight years of idleness followed Jim's high school graduation. Then, in 1961, Jim became one of the early students in the Adult Orientation and Adjustment Center newly created and directed by Dr. Kenneth Jernigan at the Iowa State Commission for the Blind. He went on to complete college and law school, and then he worked in Washington, D.C. and New York City as the first blind attorney ever hired by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Following a successful legal career with the NLRB, Jim changed careers and entered the field of work with the blind professionally. He directed the residential Orientation and Adjustment Center operated by the Iowa Commission for the Blind and served as that agency's Assistant Director; established and directed a program created by the Social Security Administration (SSA) in Baltimore, Maryland, to develop greater employment opportunities for the blind and disabled within SSA itself. Finally, he directed the Alaska Center for Blind and Deaf Adults, before retiring to Tucson.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim is also a well-rounded family man who, in addition to his working career, has been heavily involved over his lifetime in church, civic, political and advocacy activities wherever he has lived. He has also provided staff training and development programs and performed evaluations for numerous schools and private and state agencies for the blind around the country. Perhaps, most significantly, he has been an active participant along with other blind people in the organized blind movement for nearly forty years.

Therefore, Jim's knowledge of those factors which get to the essence of how best to empower blind customers is based upon a broad combination of factors—experience as a blind student first in the public schools and then at a residential school for the blind; as a state agency vocational rehabilitation client; as a blind adult orientation center student; as a blind college and law school student; as a competitively employed blind attorney; and as an orientation center director and federal official.

Even so, the knowledge about the best practices for empowering blind persons presented in this monograph is not Jim's alone. It reflects the pooled and distilled wisdom and thinking of the thousands of blind men and women of the National Federation of the Blind developed and honed over the past sixty years, and the invaluable knowledge Jim has gained from his nearly forty years of personal associa-

tion and interchange with the thousands of blind people involved in the organized blind movement.

DEDICATION

*This monograph is dedicated to my teacher and mentor, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, and to the thousands of blind men and women who have come to know that all-empowering truth:
“IT IS RESPECTABLE TO BE BLIND!”*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially grateful for the help and support of many people whose encouragement, philosophical suggestions and countless hours of proofreading and reading aloud have made this book what it is. First among these is my wife and soul mate, Sharon. I also wish to thank Joanne Wilson of the Louisiana Center for the Blind, Diane McGeorge and Julie Deden of the Colorado Center for the Blind and Joyce Scanlan of Blind Inc. for discussing the latest proven training techniques. And I wish to thank Christine Brown, Phyllis Feragne, Phyllis Soth and Charlotte Langford for hours and hours of reading and for calling my attention to areas needing expansion or clarification.

This book owes its existence to my extended family—the men, women and children of the National Federation of the Blind and the U.S. Department of Education.

I particularly wish to thank the Louisiana Center for the Blind and Louisiana Tech University for having the wisdom and insight to establish The Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness, and for creating this Critical Concerns in Blindness series. I am honored to be among its early contributors.

Finally, I am grateful to those profes-

sionals in work with the blind who took their precious time to be official reviewers of this book for the U.S. Department of Education. are:

Dr. Ralph Bartley, Superintendent, Kentucky School for the Blind, Louisville, Kentucky;

Mr. Vito J. DeSantis, Manager, Joseph Kohn Rehabilitation Center, New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Newark, New Jersey;

Dr. Ronald J. Ferguson, Senior Research Fellow, Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana;

Mr. Allen Harris, Director, Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines, Iowa;

Mr. Ed Kunz, Director, Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center, Texas Commission for the Blind, Austin, Texas;

Ms. Suzanne Mitchell, Blind Services Executive Director, Louisiana Rehabilitation Services, Baton Rouge, Louisiana;

Mr. Alan Myklebust, Principal, Arizona School for the Blind, The Arizona Schools for the Deaf and the Blind, Tucson, Arizona; and

Mrs. Barbara Pierce, consumer advocate and Editor, THE BRAILLE MONITOR, Oberlin, Ohio.

FORWARD

James Omvig has made yet another important contribution to the field of Vocational

Rehabilitation through his latest work, *FREEDOM FOR THE BLIND*. In this book Mr.

Omvig brings together the best of rehabilitation practice with the wisdom and experience of countless blind people who, through their own lives, faced and overcame the social and economic barriers arising from myths and misunderstanding about blindness. His book speaks eloquently to the point that, the renaissance in the rehabilitation of the blind is not the product of our technology nor of our science, but rather emerged out of the collective will of tens of thousands of blind people to live full, normal, productive lives.

Rehabilitation is not something that is done “to” a blind person or “for” a blind person, but “with” the blind person. Mr. Omvig does not lay the need for action solely at the feet of the rehabilitation professional; but, stresses the responsibility of the blind person to take charge of his or her own rehabilitation. The empowerment model Mr. Omvig offers, recognizes the need for thorough training in the skills of blindness, the importance of the rehabilitation system encouraging and supporting the individual, and the understanding that both, the blind person and the rehabilitation counselor, are partners in the struggle to change society’s attitudes and assumptions about blindness. Laced with charm and humor, *FREEDOM FOR THE BLIND* offers a rarely told description and analysis of the relationship between the development of confidence and skills. The reader will find knowledge, for Mr. Omvig offers a wealth of information, insight into the social context in which the rehabilitation of the blind takes place, and, perhaps most profound, a heartfelt, earnest, and frank discussion of the need for genuine partnership between the rehabilitation professional and blind people themselves.

*Dr. Fredric K. Schroeder
Former Commissioner
Rehabilitation Services Administration
U.S. Department of Education*

INTRODUCTION

“The answer is simple, if distressing. There is nothing inherently wrong with the blind as a class of people!”

“...until recently there has been something inherently wrong with the blindness system.”

As America enters the twenty-first century, statistics show that between seventy and eighty percent of her working-age blind people are unemployed (Kirchner, 1999). Of those who are employed, far too many are severely underemployed or are destined to be locked in at entry-level jobs for a lifetime. WHY? How can this be, particularly at a time when America’s unemployment rate is the lowest it has been for nearly thirty years, and when employers are begging for reliable and quality employees?

Putting to one side all of the bogus rationalizations, there can be but two possible answers to these questions. First, either blind people as a class, no matter how thoroughly trained and adjusted to their blindness they may be, are inherently incompetent and lacking in the most basic human abilities; or, second, there has been something inherently wrong with the blindness system in America—the complex of programs for educating or rehabilitating people who are blind.

The answer is simple, if distressing. There is nothing inherently wrong with the blind as a class of people! There simply is too much objective proof to the contrary among the blind who have received proper training to support this view. However, until recently there has been something inherently wrong with the blindness system. The system has been flawed in three areas: First, too many specialists involved in the education of blind children have not understood blindness and thus have not learned what it takes to provide proper training. They have not come to understand that the blind are a minority and that adjustment

services, no matter what those services may be, must be aimed at teaching the blind a new, constructive and positive set of attitudes about blindness. Second, too many people involved in providing Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and related services for blind adults have shared the same deficiencies. Third, certain provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have been misinterpreted and have served to make many blind people helpless and dependent rather than independent and self-sufficient. The lure of custodialism has become blurred with the issue of disability rights.

Putting it very directly, the inherent problem is that too many of the people running and working in most of the programs have been thinking, living and teaching in the past—they have not learned to think and dream and teach outside of the box. They have not captured the vision of new and enlightened training philosophies, practices and techniques. Therefore, they have failed to properly train and empower the blind. To compound this problem, while the blind themselves—working through the National Federation of the Blind—have experimented, studied and learned the secrets to full empowerment and freedom for the blind, too many of the specialists in the field have failed to work with and learn these known secrets from the blind. It is this resulting lack of knowledge about proper training and education which has primarily been responsible for our inordinately high unemployment rate.

To be fair about it, I must hasten to add that the schools, the public and private

agencies and the misinterpretation of the ADA have not been completely at fault for the high unemployment rate. Although the blind are not primarily responsible, I might briefly point out here—detailed explanations will follow—that the blind, themselves, are what might be referred to as a secondary part of the problem. Being a minority group, in every negative sense of the word, the blind as a class have fallen into the trap of social conditioning and have bought into the erroneous concepts of the hierarchy of sight and vision dependency. Therefore, the blind have contributed to the high unemployment rate because they typically have sold themselves short and have not reached their full potential.

Then, too, while the ADA has many redeeming features, the misinterpretation of certain of its provisions and purposes has only served to exacerbate this already troublesome situation. Far from being the help it was intended to be, for many blind college students certain provisions of the ADA have become a devilish wolf in sheep's clothing. The result is what some refer to as "learned dependency."

The present, appalling unemployment statistics should outrage the sincere devotee of quality services for the blind. What this dismal statistic indicates is that the educational and VR programs and the ADA historically have simply failed the blind. In more than a century of educational programs, in the fifty-seven years since the blind were included within VR programs, and in the ten years of ADA protection, the vision for the future and the secrets to empowerment and freedom have not been discovered by

INTRODUCTION

many specialists in the blindness system. They have not come to know and passionately embrace a proven formula for success!

If America can put a man on the moon, why can't it put the blind of this nation to work with meaningful and responsible jobs—in “high quality” employment? Why can't average blind people take control of their own lives and have significant and rewarding roles to play in their families, their communities and in society at large? The fact is that ordinary blind people can take their rightful place in society if they receive proper training and are empowered.

As is the case with many of the more enlightened state agencies for the blind, the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education (RSA) is keenly aware of the distressing unemployment statistics among people of working age who are blind. To offer an alternative solution to the problem, RSA has commissioned me to provide technical assistance and support by developing a book which offers a “non-traditional” perspective on the methods and issues which a truly successful employment training program for the blind should embrace. The book is to include information uniquely tailored both for blind audiences and for those providing professional preparation services to them. The ultimate objective is to offer information best designed to promote the goals of increased personal independence, “informed choice” and empowerment.

This monograph is the result of the project. I am confident that the knowledge

about blindness and proper training for the blind that I and others from the National Federation of the Blind have gained over my nearly forty years of work and experience in this field will be used to make a difference—to empower thousands of rank-and-file blind people across this country. The truth about blindness is known; the techniques for providing proper training are known; and the best methods for delivering services for the blind are known. They have been tried, tested and proven over and over again, and they work. In other words, there presently is a known formula for success!

In addition to the fact that this enlightened and revolutionary body of knowledge now exists, there is other positive news. First, more and more of the state agencies are forming partnerships with and learning from the blind. Also, the federal laws—the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, together with the Rules and Regulations developed and promulgated under each by the United States Department of Education—offer ample legislative authority to carry out meaningful and innovative programs based upon the empowerment model.

This book is intended to be used by the college and university programs which are preparing administrators, rehabilitation counselors, rehabilitation or independent living teachers, orientation and mobility specialists and educators of blind children. It is also appropriate for use by parents of blind children or by staff members and customers of either public or private programs for the blind.

As I write these pages, I also envision another vast audience—eye care professionals. Of course, these specialists must always use their best efforts medically to save or restore vision whenever such action is truly warranted. But when their best medical efforts fail and blindness comes, it is imperative that they have at least a basic understanding of blindness. Most important, they must know and be able to communicate to their patients that blindness does not mean the end of a happy, successful and gratifying life. They must be enabled to make appropriate referrals to quality service programs for the blind whenever it is clear that medical services cannot either save or restore meaningful sight. Therefore, I urge that this book also be used as a resource in all schools of optometry and ophthalmology.

At the outset, I would like to make it very clear that the information and knowledge about proper training and empowerment proffered in this book are not based upon what might be called traditional, scientific research. Other authors can do that. In fact, I invite serious researchers to study the salient points outlined within these pages. The practical training information presented here is based upon **REAL** life—it is based completely upon intelligence guided by the real life experiences of thousands of real blind people accumulated over nearly fifty years of intensive training, trying and testing. The type of training outlined in these pages has produced literally thousands of competent, happy, successful and involved blind people. As the old saying goes, “The proof is in the pudding.”

There are three key points readers should keep in mind while studying and pondering the information which I offer.

A. A Contrast Concerning Freedom or, Why Write This Book?

In 1976, then Iowa Commission for the Blind Director and National Federation of the Blind President Kenneth Jernigan wrote a paper in which he detailed the bleak status of the blind throughout history. He pointed out that in a very real sense the blind have been an oppressed minority. Among other things, concerning the march of the blind toward real freedom and independence, he wrote:

That march has been long, and the end is not yet in sight. The road stretches on for decades ahead, and it stretches backward to the nightmare past of slavery and pain. Yes, I say slavery, and I mean exactly what I say. I use the word deliberately, for no black was ever forced with more absolute finality to the sweat of the cane fields or driven with more terrible rigor to the heat of the cotton rows than we have been forced to the broom shops and backwaters and driven to the rocking chairs and asylums. Never mind that the custody was kindly meant and that, more often than not, the lash was pity instead of a whip. It was still a lash, and it still broke the heart and bruised the spirit.

It shriveled the soul and killed the hope and destroyed the dream. Make no mistake! It was slavery—cruel, degrading, unmitigated slavery. It cut as deep as the overseer’s whip and ground as hard as the owner’s boot.

Contrast this poignant picture of the bleak history of the blind with the following: In 1984, at a Washington, D.C. meeting of the then President's Committee On Employment of the Handicapped, I heard a group of young people who use wheelchairs perform a song which they had written. Its title was, "I WONDER WHAT IT WOULD FEEL LIKE TO BE FREE?"

I wonder what it would feel like to be free. My initial reaction to this performance was one of sadness and sorrow for these young people who obviously felt that they would never have the opportunity to share in the promise of the American dream and to participate fully in the mainstream of life. Clearly, they were convinced that they would never be in a position to take control of their own lives and destinies. How discouraging, I thought, to look at life with such feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Then, an amazing thought and emotion swept over me. I used to feel exactly like that, but I don't any longer! Why? "BECAUSE I AM FREE—I KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE FREE!" The proper training and quality services which I received in the early 1960s from my own state agency for the blind gave me this marvelous gift! This state VR agency also gave me something else—it had filled me with that burning desire not merely to survive, but to succeed!

This brings us to the "bottom line": Why can I as a blind person now enjoy feelings of normality and total freedom and independence while so many others—like those young people in wheelchairs or

like tens of thousands of blind Americans—feel like the trapped slaves which they have become? The purpose for my writing this book is to answer this question!

B. Take the High Road and Look for Positive, Constructive Information: As I write these pages with the knowledge that the information presented will empower others if it is used, I am reminded of a disturbing incident which occurred in Iowa while I was directing the Commission for the Blind's Adult Orientation and Adjustment Center. An official from another state had come to spend a week studying the Commission's programs—particularly those of the Orientation Center—since these programs had become so successful and well-known throughout America.

I assumed, of course, that this official had come to Iowa in good faith to study what we had learned about blindness and proper training so that he could take his new knowledge back to his home state. However, near the end of his week with us, when I asked him how he was getting along, his response was more than a little disturbing. He said, "This all looks too good to be true. I haven't found the flaw yet, but I will."

I was mightily disappointed. We had new and constructive information to share concerning empowerment and freedom, and this official had taken his time and ours to try to discredit our program, not to learn. I urge the readers of this book to concentrate upon the positive and to take the high road.

C. Let's Build a Temple Together:

In staff training sessions or leadership seminars which I have conducted through the years, I have frequently used the following story to make a point:

In ancient Egypt a King was having a temple built as a monument to himself. He frequently visited the construction site to follow the progress. On one such visit, he asked a laborer, "What are you doing?"

The laborer replied, "I'm cutting this rock."

The King walked along the site and then asked a second laborer what he was doing, and the man replied, "I'm chipping this stone."

The King then thoughtfully approached yet a third laborer who was doing the same work. This time, when the King asked the man what he was doing, the laborer replied, with real pride and satisfaction, "I'M BUILDING A TEMPLE!"

This insightful laborer saw the wisdom of perceiving himself as a valuable part of the larger picture—as an integral part of a team with a vision and a mission—rather than merely as an end unto himself. So it should be with those of us in work with the blind. Whether we are director or maintenance man, counselor or teacher, orientation and mobility specialist or secretary—we are part of that larger picture providing the best and most meaningful services we can. It is my earnest hope that those of us now involved in work with the blind or who become

involved in the future will be able to perceive ourselves as part of a team with a vision and as being integral to the objective of building that temple—of providing maximum empowerment and freedom for our blind customers.

And what of me? What is my interest in all of this? It is for a better tomorrow. First, however, I am well aware that one of the strongest forces on earth is the status quo, and it will be hard to change the system. Even so, it can be done if people of good will see the need and want to make it happen!

Therefore, my interest is simple. Freedom, once tasted, is irresistible, and it can kindle the hope and fuel the passions. If proper training and quality services from a state agency for the blind and full participation in the National Federation of the Blind could alter the course of my life completely and give me total freedom and independence—if I "know what it feels like to be free," then why shouldn't every other blind person in America have the same chance for freedom—for empowerment? This is my earnest hope. Words are simply inadequate to describe the feelings associated with true freedom.

To paraphrase an ancient and wise philosopher: If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him how to fish—IF YOU EMPOWER HIM—you feed him for a lifetime.

WHO IS BLIND AND WHY USE THE WORD “BLIND”?

Who is Blind?

Why Use the Word “Blind”?

A. Who is “Blind”? Not all blind people are totally blind—only a small percentage are. Yet, throughout this book I will be referring to “persons who are blind,” “the blind,” “blind people,” “the organized blind,” and “blind customers,” etc. This terminology is intended specifically to include people who are either totally or partially blind. Therefore, so that we are all on the same page, let me begin at the beginning—by discussing my views on blindness and who is a blind person.

I will be discussing the word, “blind,” with two purposes in mind. First, of course, there are the legal and functional definitions. But, even more than that, there will be discussions concerning which term (or terms) is most advantageous to use in helping customers accept and adjust to their blindness. Since the right kind of attitudinal adjustment is the key to the overall goal of true independence and self-sufficiency—to true empowerment and freedom—I will generally use the word, blind, and I will usually not be using such terms as sightless, unsighted, visually challenged, visually limited, hard of seeing or visually impaired.

It should be noted that, if I choose at all to distinguish between totally blind people and those with some residual vision, I will use the term “partially blind” rather than partially sighted. Correct terminology can assist greatly in the process of emotional adjustment. Blindness must be faced head on, and it is not helpful to try, even feebly, to duck or avoid the issue and/or the condition.

One additional preliminary point needs to be made. When I am talking in this book about using the word, “blind,” I am talking about what should be happening regularly in university programs, schools with blind students, or orientation and adjustment centers—in other words, in situations where people are actually involved in some type of training program. When a newly blinded individual is first met, however, and where that initial effort is to get the person interested at all in some kind of beneficial program, there are times when the school or agency specialist needs to be willing to tread lightly and even use some meaningless euphemisms.

I learned this lesson the hard way. When I left the National Labor Relations Board in New York City to return to Iowa and work for Kenneth Jernigan at the Iowa Commission for the Blind, I first did some traveling with other and more experienced staff members to become familiar with each of the Commission’s jobs. In traveling with one particularly talented VR counselor, I simply observed her for a few days and scarcely made a comment. Toward the end of the week, I decided that perhaps the time had come for me to participate. To get started simply, I asked a man whom we were visiting, “How long have you been blind?” Blind was not the word I should have used.

“I’m not blind!” he virtually screamed out at me.

As a novice, and perhaps as too much of a purist, I had failed to take into account that the people who have not yet accepted

their blindness enough even to get to the point of taking needed training may need to be dealt with differently from those who have made the decision to get on with their lives. From that day forward, my approach changed completely when dealing with newly blinded people who had not yet agreed to get into a training program. “How long have you had poor eyesight,” or some meaningless or useless variant thereof, became a routine part of my conversation. I did not want to make that same mistake again and, perhaps, even undo what had already been done to begin to persuade that potential new customer to get involved in proper training.

Ever since the 1930s, America has used the two Social Security legal definitions of blindness, and they have commonly been accepted both in education and VR: 1) a person is blind whose central, visual acuity in the better eye with best correction is 20/200 or less (this means that a blind person with this acuity would stand twenty feet away to see something which a person with ordinary vision could see from a distance of two hundred feet); or, 2) even where the central, visual acuity does not meet this test, a person is blind when the angle of vision is 20 degrees or less—what is commonly referred to as “tunnel” or “pinhole” vision.

Rather than simply to rely upon some specific legal test, however, I believe that it is much more helpful to use a functional definition. In my view, a person is blind—and should learn to refer to himself or herself as blind—when vision has deteriorated to the point that, to func-

WHO IS BLIND AND WHY USE THE WORD “BLIND”?

tion capably and efficiently, the individual uses alternative techniques to accomplish the majority of life's daily activities, even though there is some residual vision which may well be quite useful for certain, limited purposes. This book provides information about the most positive and appropriate methods which are presently known for empowering blind customers, not with legal technicalities or niceties. The goal is not to determine eligibility for special education, VR or independent living (IL) services.

How often have you heard a customer proclaim, “I'm not blind, I'm just legally blind.” In my own case, I was fond of using the cutsie phrase, “I'm not blind, I'm just a little hard of seeing.” Blind individuals who have not accepted and adjusted to their blindness will go to extraordinary lengths in a fruitless effort to avoid the stigma of being thought of as “BLIND.” There is an obvious reason why an individual will eagerly go to such extremes.

B. Why Use the Word “Blind”?

A process of what is commonly called “adjustment to blindness” training is essential to the empowerment of the blind. We will explore this concept further in later chapters. Simply learning to use the word, “blind,” with ease and comfort and accepting blindness as a normal fact of life is one major ingredient in the adjustment process. It is commonly understood that you cannot change what you are not willing to acknowledge!

Further, since the blind customer must learn to accept and use the word, “blind,”

to become fully empowered, specialists in the field must also learn to accept the term, become comfortable using it and embrace it. Therefore, I will use the term routinely in this monograph, because we are dealing with issues as serious as life itself. Since this is so, there is no room for becoming embroiled in philosophical debates about the validity, or lack of validity, of political correctness, at least insofar as it relates to blindness.

For an exact analogy on the issues of denial and terminology, consider the struggle by African Americans to achieve equality and freedom. In the 1940s and 50s, and even on into the 60s, some black Americans tried to solve their problems by pretending that they weren't black at all, but that they were white—this practice was denial at its worst and came to be referred to as trying to “pass.” Needless to say, it didn't work.

Then, enlightened and gifted leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came upon the scene. He and others realized that pretending you are something other than who you really are is fruitless and that the only way Black Americans could ever achieve real freedom, equality and self-respect was to work together to make it respectable to be Black. Dr. King knew that, ultimately, you must learn to love yourself as you are, and for whom you are, to attain true freedom and self-respect.

So it is with the blind. If you pretend you aren't who and what you really are, if you engage in what some call “the great masquerade,” agony and frustration will

be the result. In my own case, I pretended (I tried to pass and deny my blindness) for fourteen years—from age twelve to twenty-six. I have often marveled at the fact that I didn't develop an extreme case of ulcers during this painful time. The fear that someone would learn just how blind I really was was very nearly unbearable.

Let me give you two examples to show you what folly and frustration it is when a blind person tries to use the great masquerade to get along. First, night blindness goes hand-in-hand with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP). Therefore, during my teen years, when I would come indoors from bright sunlight, I was totally blind until my eyes could adjust. So, just picture this. I enter a strange house and simply stand there. A friend's mother, being the proper hostess, says, "Won't you have a seat?"

And I answer (since I'm ashamed to tell her that I can't see the seat), "No thanks. I've been sitting a lot today, so I'd rather stand."

Here is the second example (other blind people can share the same kinds of stories, but for my purposes it's better to tell tales on myself). When I was in the eighth grade in my small farming community, we were given the Iowa Basic Skills test. I couldn't read the test at all, but I didn't tell the test monitor that I couldn't read. I went through the test page by page and marked answers randomly, without reading a single question. It would be fun, today, to go back to that school and find out what kind of score I got using what

you might call the "Russian Roulette" method of test-taking.

Aren't these terrific examples of how to try to get through one's already difficult teen years? I now know much more than I knew then. If you are blind, you are blind! Accept it! Admit it! The very first step in this process is to learn to be able to say, with neither shame nor embarrassment, "I am blind!" We, like other minorities, have a job to do—we must learn to accept our blindness and then work together to make it respectable to be blind.

The same is true for professionals in the field of work with the blind. We have no business helping our blind customers (whether they be totally or partially blind) deny what and who they are and to try to pass or engage in the great masquerade. Rather, we, too, must learn that it is respectable to be blind. Only then can we truly help to empower and bring freedom to others.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH A “DEFINED” PHILOSOPHY

The “Iowa Experiment”

*An Agency “Defined
Philosophy” About Blindness*

*Why a “Defined Philosophy”
About Blindness?*

*Why Use the Word “Normal”
in this Defined Philosophy?*

*Why Refer to the Blind as a
“Cross-Section” of Society?*

*Why Refer to Blindness as a
“Characteristic”?*

*Why Talk of
“Alternative Techniques”?*

*What Do You Mean by
the “Hierarchy of Sight”?*

*Can Blind People Really
Learn?*

If you are blind, then you are blind! If surgery is not a viable possibility, then there is nothing which can be done by anyone to change this physical fact. However, people CAN change what they think about blindness and about the kind of life they can expect to live as blind people. Clearly, it is to everyone’s advantage (whether customer or service provider) as true empowerment is sought, to look at blindness from the most positive and encouraging point of view which can be found.

Regrettably, neither my family nor I understood this simple truth while I was young. When I was diagnosed at age twelve with RP and told that I would become totally blind one day, I was devastated. I didn’t know anyone who was blind. Of course, I had seen blind beggars on the streets of Des Moines, so I thought I knew. Naturally, I had many opinions—incorrect opinions—about blindness.

The Omvig philosophy at that time was pretty simple and direct, and my family and I were of one mind on the subject. “In order to have a successful and happy life,” we thought, “one must have sight!” Surely the two were synonymous. I thought that it was as simple and clear-cut as that. Without ever knowing it, I had bought hook, line and sinker into the myth of the “hierarchy of sight.” Three-and-a-half years at the Iowa School for the Blind, and another eight years following high school graduation sitting at home in idleness and fear with my parents in a small, Iowa farming community did nothing to change this negative and self-limiting view.

When I was twenty-six years old, I had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time. I was given the chance to become one of the early students in the new, residential Adult Orientation and Adjustment Center established and operated by Kenneth Jernigan at the Iowa Commission for the Blind in Des Moines, Iowa. For the first time in my life I learned detailed information and a positive philosophy about blindness and learned to separate truth from fiction on the subject. Furthermore, I also learned just how critical it is in the adjustment to blindness process for an agency or school not only to hold a positive, "defined" philosophy about blindness, but also to take vigorous steps to teach it to its blind customers.

A. The "Iowa Experiment": Movements are built of principles and of people. Movements, without principles, should not exist. Movements, with principles, but without men and women of energy, integrity, intelligence and training to lead them and to give them life, cannot exist!

In the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), we find the story of a people's movement—a movement with men and women of character, energy, integrity and vast knowledge and experience—a movement rich in principle and conviction, a movement with purposes as irrepressible as the aspiration of a people to be free! This people's movement has been key in my life and in the lives of thousands of other competent and successful blind men and women.

When I became nearly totally blind at

eighteen years of age, neither my family nor I knew of role models, successful and competent blind people who could provide valuable guidance or who could give us the slightest amount of hope to which to cling. In the Iowa of the late 1940s and early 1950s, blind beggars with dark glasses and tin cups or blind rug weavers were the order of the day.

Further, my family and I were not aware that the active blind of America had organized themselves into a movement in 1940. It was much later when I learned that blind representatives from seven states had gathered together in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and had formed the National Federation of the Blind. Until that time in American history, others had spoken for, done for, and frequently done to the blind, but the blind as a class had never done for themselves or represented or spoken for themselves.

The founder and early leader of the National Federation of the Blind was a brilliant, blind college professor from California named Dr. Jacobus tenBroek. As he put it in one of his last writings (1967), "The blind have a right to live in the world. That right is as deep as human nature, as pervasive as the need for social existence, as ubiquitous as the human race, and as invincible as the human spirit."

TenBroek and the other early leaders of the Federation soon developed a vast body of knowledge—a true understanding of the nature of blindness and the real social and economic problems faced by blind people. These TRUTHS which they discovered

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and developed came to be known as the “Federation Philosophy.”

Those early leaders of the Federation also understood that, if educational or VR programs were ever to be of any real use to the blind, those programs would have to be aimed at helping blind customers change their attitudes about their own blindness. The customers, themselves, would have to come to understand emotionally as well as intellectually that it is respectable to be blind and that the properly trained blind person can have a normal, happy, productive and satisfying life. If these attitudinal adjustments could be made as a part of the educational or VR processes, the teaching and learning of the simple skills of blindness would be readily achievable.

But, while Federation leaders understood these truths, the professional educators and rehabilitators of the day did not. They continued to believe that the Federation’s ideas about what proper services **SHOULD BE** and what the blind **COULD BECOME** were mere “pie in the sky” fantasies. As they put it, “You don’t have to work with those people day after day like we do. What you say may sound great, but it is totally unrealistic and won’t work.”

This rejection of Federation ideas and ideals by the blindness establishment ultimately became a blessing in disguise for me, for it was because of this rejection of truth that I ended up being “in the right place at the right time.” By the mid-1950s, Dr. tenBroek had been joined in the leadership of the Federation by a young,

blind Tennessean by the name of Kenneth Jernigan. Although he was a trained educator, Kenneth Jernigan had also become involved with, and expert in, VR programs for blind adults.

Since the blindness establishment had not accepted the Federation’s vision as to what good educational or rehabilitation programs needed to be, and since most state rehabilitation programs were not only useless, but often downright harmful to their blind customers, tenBroek and Jernigan devised a plan. They needed to conduct an “EXPERIMENT.” They decided that Kenneth Jernigan should get himself hired in some state as the Director of services for the blind. Then, he could infuse the Federation’s ideas into every facet of the state service program. Either the Federation was right, or it was wrong—either the philosophy would work in the day-to-day setting of a VR agency for the blind, or it wouldn’t!

In late 1957, the opportunity presented itself—the directorship of the Iowa Commission for the Blind came open. Kenneth Jernigan set out to get himself hired, and he assumed his new duties in Des Moines, Iowa, as Director of that agency in March of 1958.

The time was right for Kenneth Jernigan to come to Iowa. Need among blind Iowans was great, since, according to federal rehabilitation officials, Iowa had the worst rehabilitation programs for the blind in America. Further, the Federation philosophy needed to be tried, tested and proven, or disproven.

It was also the right time for Kenneth

Jernigan, personally. He arrived in Iowa during some of his best years, the very prime of life, when experience, energy and intellect mingle in their most favorable proportions. He was old enough to possess maturity, vast knowledge and experience, but he was also young enough to possess boundless energy, fearless determination and tireless dedication to the cause. He was a crusader—a crusader driven by a passion for justice for the blind!

It was as a part of this Iowa “experiment,” then, that I first encountered Kenneth Jernigan, the National Federation of the Blind and the “Federation Philosophy.” It was also as a part of this Iowa experiment that I found hope, where there had been only hopelessness—that I acquired a passion for life and that burning desire not merely to survive, but to succeed!

It is little wonder that only ten short years after Kenneth Jernigan came to Iowa, he was given a Presidential Citation by Lyndon Johnson for his pioneering work in the field of vocational rehabilitation. The presentation was made on behalf of President Johnson by the Chairman of the President’s Committee on Employment of the Handicapped. In his accompanying remarks, he wrote (Russell, 1968), “If a person must be blind, it is better to be blind in Iowa than in any other place in the nation or the world!”

The “Iowa experiment” worked! The NFB was correct in its belief that properly trained blind people could live wonderful, normal, successful, meaningful and rewarding lives. As a result of Kenneth

Jernigan’s twenty years as head of the Iowa Commission for the Blind, the lives of thousands of blind Americans have been forever changed. Further, there is no longer any basis for questioning the validity of the NFB’s philosophy. **IT WORKS! IT IS THE TRUTH!**

B. An Agency “Defined Philosophy” About Blindness: It has wisely been said that, “Philosophy bakes no bread.” It has been said with equal wisdom and validity, however, that “Without a philosophy, no bread is baked!”

While I was a student at the Iowa Commission for the Blind’s adult orientation and adjustment center, we did many and varied things, but always we came back to a philosophical discussion about blindness—what it is and what it means. This “Federation Philosophy” can generally be set forth in ten factual statements. A brief summary of those facts about blindness which I learned from Kenneth Jernigan in 1961—the philosophy which is taught today as we enter the twenty-first century by the quality residential orientation and adjustment centers around the country—is as follows:

- (1) blind people are simply normal, ordinary people who cannot see;
- (2) the blind are merely a cross-section of society as a whole, mirroring society in every way with the same hopes, interests and desires, the same dreams, abilities and potential as everyone else;
- (3) the physical condition of blindness is nothing more than a normal, human

characteristic, like the hundreds of others which, taken together, mold each of us into an unique human being;

(4) given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business, can have a family, can be a tax paying and participating citizen and can be in every way a contributing member of society who can compete on terms of absolute equality with his or her sighted neighbors;

(5) with proper training and opportunity, blindness is not a tragedy. It literally can be reduced to the level of a physical inconvenience or nuisance;

(6) the actual physical limitations associated with the characteristic of blindness can easily be overcome by using alternative techniques for doing without sight what you would do with sight if you had it;

(7) the concept of the hierarchy of sight—that is, the notion that the level to which a blind person can be competent and successful rises or falls in direct proportion to the amount of vision he or she has—is nothing more than a myth and is completely false;

(8) to sum it all up, “IT IS RESPECTABLE TO BE BLIND” and the blind, themselves, are primarily responsible for pushing back the frontiers of ignorance and changing what it means to be blind in the broader society;

(9) “You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.” That is, blind people cannot, on the

one hand, use their blindness to get some advantage or something they want and then, on the other hand, demand equality and opportunity when it would be nice to have it—the blind deserve freedom and equality, yes, but hand-in-hand with equality comes responsibility; and, finally

(10) the real problem of blindness is not the physical loss of eyesight at all, but rather is to be found in the wide range of societal misunderstandings and misconceptions about blindness shared by the blind and sighted alike. Putting it quite bluntly, the blind are, in every sense of the word, a minority group, with all of the negative implications which this phrase conjures up.

The fact was in 1961—when I was in training—as it is today, that the average person on the street (blind or sighted) thinks of blindness as an unmitigated disaster—as a tragedy—and that blind people are helpless, incompetent and unable even to care for themselves, let alone make useful contributions to society. It is this ATTITUDINAL PROBLEM, then, this public image—not blindness itself—which has been the negative force keeping the blind down and out through the centuries, and which must be addressed effectively by educational or VR programs.

The blind, of course, being a part of the larger society, are conditioned by that society. They see themselves as others see them: they have bought into the negative view of inferiority. Tennyson put it best when he wrote in Ulysses, “I am part of all I have met.” Thus, when we note that

between seventy and eighty percent of the blind of working age are presently unemployed, and of those who are employed, far too many are either seriously underemployed or locked in forever at entry-level positions, we can understand that both society and blind people themselves have created the problem.

In truth, however, given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can have a great life and compete as an equal with the average sighted person in all aspects of human endeavor. Properly trained blind people now have a home and a family and have assumed the duties and privileges of first-class citizenship. Every day, thousands of blind people go to work in high quality jobs as businessmen and women, lawyers, farmers, factory workers, public school teachers, college professors, cooks, mechanics, machinists, scientists, governmental officials, rehabilitation or education professionals and politicians, etcetera.

While most of the ten philosophical points outlined above are clear, a few of them require elaboration to explain why a particular word or phrase is used. Before turning to these specifics, however, we must first resolve the question as to why an agency or school needs to have a defined philosophy about blindness and to teach it to its Customers.

C. Why a “Defined” Philosophy About Blindness? Nature abhors a vacuum! When a child is born, the mind is what has been referred to as a blank slate. Certainly this is true so far as any attitude or prejudice about blindness is concerned.

But it is not long until every young child is taught (subtly or not so subtly) the erroneous, stereotypical thinking which pervades our society. That teaching takes place in large ways and small. This negative instruction is simple, but direct. **BLINDNESS MEANS INFERIORITY!**

Here is an apparently minor but typical example of how the child’s “vacuum” is filled. My sighted wife and I take a walk through a crowded mall—a common enough occurrence. I always use my long, white cane whether or not I happen to be walking with someone else. Frequently, a small child coming toward us and seeing the cane asks his father, loudly, “What’s that, Daddy?” I can hear Daddy silence the child and pull him out of “harm’s way,” often with the proverbial hand over the mouth. Without the utterance of a single word by Dad, that youngster has been taught that blindness is bad and is to be feared and avoided.

How much better it would be in this situation for the father to say, calmly, to this impressionable child, “That man is blind. He uses the cane to feel for objects or steps in front of him, so he can get around safely. Don’t you think that’s neat?” But, because of the father’s poor attitudes and lack of information about blindness, he prejudices the child’s thinking.

Or, ponder this one. Since I have actively worked for many years along with others in the organized blind movement to improve public attitudes about blindness, friends and acquaintances from around the country frequently send me trouble-

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some problems which they run across. Not many years ago, a friend sent me a copy of a grade school math book. It was at that learning level where pictures accompany numbers to teach the kids what a particular number means. To portray the number, three, the textbook picture was of a blind beggar holding a tin cup containing three pencils. The message was clear, if damning.

I could write an entire book giving examples such as these, but I believe the point is unmistakable. In ways both large and small, we are taught from infancy that “blindness means inferiority.” These negative messages continue for a lifetime through movies, books, newspapers, tv, radio, etcetera. As a part of this negative instruction, those of us who are blind also frequently conduct ourselves in such a way as to create the very negative attitudes about which we would then complain. More about this later.

Even though all of this is true, I sometimes meet people who try to convince me, “I have no pre-conceived notions about blindness; no, I really don’t!” To which I say, “Don’t you believe it!” Everyone (either customer or service provider) has learned negative attitudes, and everyone concerned in one way or another with issues of blindness needs a positive attitudinal adjustment! I repeat, nature abhors a vacuum.

To emphasize a lesson brushed at above, some may misunderstand this point and mistakenly believe that I am suggesting that only sighted people have negative and destructive attitudes and teach them regularly to young, fresh minds. The point to

be emphasized here is that all people, blind and sighted alike, are a part of this problem, since we all are part of the broader society. We who are blind are just as guilty as people who are sighted. As with other minorities, the blind involuntarily assimilate society’s mistaken views and believe them until some form of a positive intervention occurs. That’s what this book on empowering the blind is all about.

All of this brings us back to the question of why agencies and schools must have positive, defined philosophies about blindness if they truly intend to empower. The answer is simple— **EVERYONE HAS A MIND FITTED WITH NEGATIVE AND ERRONEOUS INFORMATION ABOUT BLINDNESS!** Since this is so—since the vacuum has been filled—we must direct and focus the customer’s thinking upon new, positive, accurate information with enough intensity and volume to override and replace the negative information which the mind has already processed and stored up.

Put another way, each of us has a small part of the brain set aside which stores information about blindness, and what has already been stored is bad. We need to make certain that what is stored from now on is both positive and accurate.

The odds are that newly blinded people (or people who have been blind for a long time but who have never experienced proper training) won’t be able to do this on their own, but rather will need something or someone to intervene. Here is where the quality service provider and the defined philosophy come in. I have

observed over the past forty years that the most positive way to approach blindness that I know of is found in the philosophy I learned through my own state agency, the Iowa Commission for the Blind, outlined in the ten points above. It was this philosophy—this belief in the normality of other blind people and in myself—which made it possible for me to go to college and on to law school and to have the wonderful career and life which I have enjoyed.

One final point needs to be made on the subject of a defined, school or agency philosophy. **EVERY SCHOOL OR AGENCY FOR THE BLIND HAS A PHILOSOPHY ABOUT BLINDNESS!** Even those that say nothing on the subject or loudly proclaim that they don't have one at all, really do. If the program philosophy is not defined and articulated directly, one can determine it easily not by what is said but by what is done. Also, it will be involuntarily assimilated by that program's customers.

For a typical example, I know only too well that the philosophy about blindness of the Iowa School for the Blind when I attended it (I assume that it is better now) was quite simple and direct, but damning: "The blinder you are, the more helpless and useless you are." The concept of the hierarchy of sight was rampant. Now, please understand, no one ever stated this attitude out loud, but this deadly message was taught to us, nevertheless.

How? By what we observed and experienced at the school. To illustrate, when tours were to be led (and there were many), only students with some vision were asked to lead them; when something needed to be moved, only students with vision were

asked to help; when we went on a boy scout camping trip, the totally blind boys were led into the woods and placed to sit on a log, and the partially blind boys gathered the wood, put up the tent, cooked the food, and dished up a plate which was then taken to the totally blind who were just sitting; when the totally blind students wanted to leave the campus to go downtown to buy candy or to go to a movie, they had to find a partially blind student who would serve as guide and lead them. These are but a few blatant examples of the school's negative and destructive philosophy.

Putting the defined philosophy issue quite simply, the question of what a customer thinks about himself or herself cannot be left to mere chance or happy coincidence or accident—it can't, that is, if our goal is honestly to empower. Every program for the blind teaches its customers, either intentionally or not, what it believes about blindness. To make certain that what is taught is positive and is not like the notions I learned at the Iowa School for the Blind, the service provider simply needs to adopt and espouse the right philosophy. As we will discuss in another chapter, a good school or training center literally must be an attitude factory. A positive, defined philosophy is the major part of that factory's intricate machinery.

D. Why Use the Word, "Normal," in this Defined Philosophy? When they are honest, most people (blind or sighted) don't believe for a minute that blind people are normal. We must take whatever measures we can to teach our customers that they are.

This word, “normal,” together with the inference that blind people are not, comes up all too frequently in routine, human dialogue, and blind customers need to learn that they are ok. For example, some years ago I had an unpleasant incident with an airline over my right to keep my cane on the plane. The air carrier had me arrested because I insisted that I had the right to keep the white cane with me near my seat—stowed between the seat and the fuselage. The incident began when I approached the gate. The gate attendant asked casually, “Would you like to pre-board, or do you want to board with the normal people?”

I smiled and replied, “I think I’ll just board with the normal people if you don’t mind,” and things deteriorated from there.

The bottom line to this point is that blind customers can’t do much in the way of positive, attitudinal adjustment—they can’t come emotionally to know that it is respectable to be blind—until they can begin to think of themselves as normal, ordinary people. A human being must first say a thing, often over and over, before he or she can learn to believe it intellectually, and then one must come to believe it intellectually before he or she can really internalize it and come honestly to feel it emotionally. So I advocate injecting the word, normal, into training whenever it comes handy. If we as blind people are normal, and I believe that we are, then let’s say so.

The converse of this is what usually happens. The blind see themselves as abnor-

mal. Therefore, they will do anything they can to avoid facing the issue. For example, I know a young, blind woman who attended public high school. Her sighted sister went to the same school, but she was so embarrassed about having a blind sister that she wouldn’t tell her friends that my young blind friend was her sister. Or, consider the blind teenager whose father was so ashamed of having a blind son that, when they were riding somewhere in the car, the father made the blind boy duck down in the seat as they passed the father’s friends. Just think about it; the father didn’t want his friends to know that the blind boy existed! Now, there is a real piece of attitudinal adjustment!

It is this shame and embarrassment—this feeling of abnormality and inferiority—which drives people to avoid the word, blind, and which makes some blind people embarrassed to be seen in public using white canes or Braille books. It is this shame and embarrassment which drives some blind people into the very condition of personal slavery about which Kenneth Jernigan wrote in the passage I quoted in the Introduction to this book.

E. Why Refer to the Blind as Being a “Cross-Section” of Society? This has to do with the attitudinal problems which arise from being a minority group. Ridiculous as it is, many people tend to think of the blind as being all alike. This phenomenon, of course, is not unique to us. Many people tend also to believe that all African-Americans are alike, or that all Hispanics are alike, etcetera.

Of course, we are not all alike! We are as different as sighted people are. Some of us are bright, others are dull, but most fall somewhere in between, just like sighted people. Some blind people are lazy, some are extremely energetic and ambitious, but most fall somewhere in between. Some of us are highly educated, others not, but most fall somewhere in between, just as is the case with the sighted. Since we are a cross-section mirroring society in every way, it is merely a helpful tool as a part of the adjustment process to remind our customers that this is so.

F. Why Refer to Blindness as a “Characteristic”? Again, this point deals with the development of feelings of normality. Every human being is made up of a combination of characteristics—normal characteristics. Some human beings are female, others are male; some are tall, others short; some are fat, others thin; some are dark-skinned, others light; some have red hair, others black or brown; some are educated, others not. These and hundreds of other characteristics mold each of us into an unique person. Whatever else we may say about them, such characteristics are perceived by the vast majority of people in our society as being normal.

By their very nature, characteristics sometimes carry with them limitations to one degree or another. If you are male, you can't be female—you can't bear children, but who complains about this enormous limitation. If you're extremely short, you can't play professional basketball, but who whines about it. If you're heavy, you can't be a horse jockey. If you don't have an education, there are lots of jobs for which

you may as well not apply.

These and similar characteristics with their inherent limitations are perceived in our society as being normal; even though the limitations deriving from them can be major and extremely frustrating. The fact is that if we as human beings have our wits about us, we simply accept these limitations—these normal and ordinary facts of life—without so much as a whimper, and we move on.

When blindness enters the picture, however, we somehow think of it and its inherent limitations as different and more severe. I contend, however, that blindness is exactly like all of our other characteristics—sometimes, of course, these limitations can be nuisances or they may even be inconvenient. Usually, as with other normal characteristics, the characteristic of blindness is just one more simple fact of life which has nothing to do with anything—it simply is not relevant in most of life's situations.

If we can help our customers come to look at blindness just like they look at and accept who they are in all other respects—with their normal characteristics, then we will have gone a long way toward helping them accept who they really are—female, tall, thin, red-headed, educated, blind, AND NORMAL!

Those of us in work with the blind must continuously be watching for situations where lay people or scholars, too, single out one particular characteristic and then try to use that single characteristic as a method for defining the entire person—even with all of his or her other characteristics—as

abnormal. Blindness, of course, is not the only area where this false and destructive reasoning has been used and gone unchallenged. If we as specialists in the field of blindness work together, we can stop this false and misleading practice.

G. Why Talk of “Alternative Techniques”? If we have lost much or all of our vision, and if we want to continue or learn to function competently and efficiently, then we must devise methods for doing without sight what we would do with sight if we had it. Through the years, many methods for doing just that have been developed both for and by the blind. For the convenience and enhancement of human communication, these methods needed to be identified generally by some descriptive word or phrase. Perhaps, in the beginning, this choice was even partly casual.

An alternative technique is nothing more than a “different” way of performing some task. I have adopted the phrase “alternative techniques” specifically since this is the phrase the blind themselves have chosen. Others talk of blind techniques, the skills of blindness or compensatory skills, etcetera.

When the blind chose the phrase, alternative techniques, however, the word, “alternative,” clearly was not selected accidentally. The very term suggests equality and normality. If, on the other hand, someone had proposed “substitute techniques,” this idea would have been rebuffed by the blind, for the very word, substitute, suggests inferiority. When you can’t get the thing you want, you may well

be willing to accept a “substitute,” but you do so knowing you have received less than you have bargained for.

Most alternative techniques are about as efficient as sighted techniques; some are inferior, and others are superior. But, in the end, it all averages out pretty well. So there is nothing mysterious or difficult to understand about the phrase. It boils down to being a simple yet positive way to describe how blind people do things efficiently without having sight.

H. What Do You Mean by the “Hierarchy of Sight”? Sometimes this negative and erroneous attitude is spelled out, but more often it is subtly implied—implied by what is done or said. But the meaning is unmistakable. People who hold this view believe that the level to which the average blind person can succeed and have a full and happy life is governed directly by the amount of vision he or she has. If you are only a “little bit blind,” then you can achieve a modicum of success, but you must understand, of course, that the success you can achieve will never be as great as it would be if you were to have 20/20 vision.

On the other hand, as the level of vision declines, so the possibilities for a good life decline. This, of course, is nonsense! Even so, lots of people—both blind and sighted—cling to this view.

People who fall into this trap also become what some call vision dependent. They mistakenly believe—that they must have vision in order to be able to do virtually anything at all.

As you read this section of this chapter, care must be taken that what I am saying is not misunderstood or taken out of context. I am not suggesting for a moment that sight is not valuable or an asset, if you have it! Sight is always valuable. Even a small amount is an asset if the person with some residual vision learns how properly to use it and does not try to use it when it does not work.

What I am saying is that, if you have limited vision or no vision at all, this fact simply has nothing whatsoever to do with how happy and successful you ultimately can be. The blind person's innate talents and abilities, and the extent to which he or she has received and benefitted from proper blindness training—the extent to which he or she has been empowered—will determine that.

I have already said that, given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business and do it as well as his or her sighted neighbor. This is true, literally! The amount of vision, if any, which the blind person has is simply not relevant to this truth and to ultimate success and happiness.

To look at this hierarchy of sight concept a little differently, let's examine an old proverb. "I felt sorry for myself because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet. I felt sorry for myself because I had no feet, until . . ." The old proverb goes on and on becoming more dismal by the line. Nevertheless, it is looked upon as a technique for making yourself feel good, in spite of the perceived terrible circum-

stances in which you find yourself.

Try relating this technique to blindness, "I felt sorry for myself because I am partially blind, until I met a man who had no sight at all!" Looking at it from this perspective, one easily can determine that, far from being a healthy way to approach life, it is damaging—it is destructive!

The partially blind person who tries to make himself or herself feel better by suggesting that he or she is better off than the person who is totally blind, has fallen into a trap. hierarchy of sight theory has failed miserably.

If such an individual is really made to feel better because of having some limited vision rather than being totally blind, then what happens when he or she looks the opposite direction and makes a similar comparison against the person with 20/20 eyesight. He or she will then feel as badly as ever since, following this logic, partial blindness would stack up pretty poorly against ordinary acuity.

This entire method of making yourself feel better by convincing yourself that you are better off than someone else is flawed. It is a phony way of pretending to feel good!

What is needed is something else altogether. Through proper training and the resulting empowerment, the customer must learn to accept and love himself or herself for who and what that person is! Only then can honest feelings of self-confidence, self-esteem and true happiness come to the surface. There is absolutely

nothing to be gained by comparing oneself to others. Our customers must learn that “It’s OK to be blind—it is respectable to be blind.”

I. Can Blind People Really Learn? Perhaps this is as good a place as any to comment upon and debunk another false and misleading statement which permeates the literature on blindness. It is frequently said by professionals and researchers that “eighty percent of all learning takes place through the eye.” This is stated as fact over and over again. If this were true, those of us who are blind would be reduced to a veritable nothingness.

But, of course, it is not at all true. Perhaps it would be true and accurate—I really don’t know—to say, “Eighty percent of all learning takes place through the eye, if you have 20/20 vision.” This statement at least allows for the possibility that blind people can learn through methods which are not visual. But this is not how this false and misleading statement is written.

We must be careful in the literature when we repeat phrases which sound pretty good only until some thought is given to them. Clearly, these and similar erroneous statements and beliefs arise from all of the negative and mistaken attitudes which exist about blindness. The blind as a class of people are thought to be inferior.

These false and misleading statements become even more damaging and magnified when they are quoted in research as true, even though the researcher writ-

ing the newest article never takes the time to go back to examine the original source. It is erroneous statements such as these—repeated over and over in the literature—which tend to perpetuate the myth of the inferiority of the blind among blindness specialists and which lead to our being viewed as a minority group.

“MINORITY GROUP” STATUS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Blindness is a “visible” characteristic, and the blind as a group of people are perceived as inferior. A simple fact of life is that society tends to lump those who are identifiably different in some physical way into minority groups and treat them differently. Therefore, the blind as a class are viewed by society as a “minority group,” with all of the negative implications which this phrase implies. This is simply a fact of life, and one with which we must cope. The blind generally are judged and considered not as individuals with individual talents and abilities, but by what the people with whom we are dealing think about blindness and the blind as a class. This circumstance transforms blindness into a social problem, an attitudinal problem, not a physical one.

I first encountered this phenomenon when I graduated from high school in 1953. A neighbor—an enterprising insurance salesman—persuaded me to buy some life insurance. My policy was to be sold at a standard rate and was to include waiver of premium and double indemnity (accidental death) benefits.

A few weeks later, when he brought me the policy, my neighbor seemed a little ill at ease. “I have your policy,” he said, “but there are a few changes. Because of your poor eyes, you’ll have to pay a little higher rate than the one I quoted you. Also, because of your eyes, I can’t sell you waiver of premium or double indemnity benefits, but I still think you’ve got quite a good deal here.”

I wish I could tell you as I write these

“MINORITY GROUP” STATUS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

pages that I had understood then that blatant discrimination was taking place, and that I had refused to take the watered-down policy, but I can't. I took the policy. In my mind, this seemed reasonable. After all, I was “hard of seeing.” It seemed reasonable to me that I would be considered by the insurance industry to be a poor risk because of my “poor eyes.” I had accepted society's view of myself, including my inferiority.

The next time I personally encountered such blatant discrimination because of the minority-group status of the blind was when I was interviewing for a job upon graduation from law school. The personnel director of the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, following a friendly chat about my qualifications, said, “I'm sorry. We hired a blind attorney once, and it didn't work out, so we can't hire you!”

This time, since I did know about blindness and about discrimination because of my years of active participation in the NFB, I fought vigorously, but I didn't get the job. Among other things, I said, “Consider me and my record as an individual! Don't just lump me together with your impression of what ‘the blind’ are supposed to be able to do.” “Did you ever hire a sighted person who didn't work out? I bet you have, but you didn't then refuse to hire other sighted people! I'll just bet you considered them based upon their individual talents and abilities! That's all I'm asking that you do with me!” “What do you think would happen if, today, you were to say to a Black applicant, “I'm sorry, but we hired a

Black attorney once, and it didn't work out, so we can't hire you?””

My encounter with the personnel director happened in 1966. Civil rights protection was not yet available to the blind. But by this time in my life, I knew the entire picture: Blind people were being refused the right to go to certain schools because of their blindness; blind people were refused the right to rent apartments; to give blood at blood banks; to rent safe deposit boxes, etc.; and countless blind people were being denied jobs for which they were qualified. We were denied the right to ride at amusement parks, or to engage in other activities the public perceived to be too dangerous for us.

These and similar things continue to happen to blind people today. It makes no difference whether we are totally or partially blind. From this “minority group” point of view, we are all alike. We are incompetent, helpless, poor risks and incapable of handling quality employment in the “rough and tumble” of real competition. We are inferior.

All of this and much more happens because of negative and erroneous public attitudes about blindness. The blind are still perceived to be a class of people who are inferior. As previously stated, it is these negative and erroneous attitudes, not the physical fact of blindness, which we as blind people must learn to handle if we are truly to be empowered and to have the chance for happy, successful, quality lives.

Therefore, everything the quality ser-

vice provider does must flow from an understanding that the blind as a class are perceived by society as a minority, and that blind customers have bought into this view. Services, no matter what they are, must be aimed at teaching the blind a new and constructive set of attitudes about blindness, based upon the understanding that the old views of inferiority are wrong and harmful. The very first step in this process is for the service provider itself to understand and accept the fact that the blind are a minority. If this learning does not take place, then those services which are provided will have the wrong focus. Services must be focused properly in order truly to empower.

Service providers should also be aware of something else. The blind who have tasted independence and freedom are no longer willing to be treated as second-class citizens. They long for—no, they insist upon—equal treatment.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH AN “INDEPENDENT,” SEPARATE STATE AGENCY

Background

Why a Separate, “Independent” Agency for the Blind?

All Rehabilitation Is Alike, Isn’t It?

Who is “Responsible” in an Independent Agency?

We Need Experts in Blindness

There Is Also a Human Element

Accountability

Direct Legislative and Gubernatorial Contact

Will Lumping Everything Together Save Money?

A Wise Investment

How Can You Get and/or Keep an Independent Agent

Separate and Independent “Is” Best

In Summary

There are many factors involved in empowering blind customers and helping them achieve true independence and freedom. In Chapter I, we examined the use of the word blind and the importance of acceptance of blindness as a part of the adjustment process. In Chapter II, we took a thorough look at a “defined philosophy” about blindness and discussed the importance of a service provider’s having and promoting one. In Chapter III, we looked at the minority group status of the blind and pointed out that it is essential to success for a service provider to understand that the blind are truly a “minority group” within our society. It takes a thorough understanding of this fact in order to enable any service provider to put the proper focus on needed services.

Now we move to the next step. When we are dealing with vocational rehabilitation (VR) or independent living (IL) services for blind adults, the very governmental structure of the state service agency itself can be an enormous factor contributing to the freedom outcome and one which merits serious and thorough study. It is essential that states select the governmental structure best calculated to allow for delivery of the best possible services.

Everyone involved in adult work with the blind—be they a director of a state agency for the blind or a consumer organization of the blind—agrees that the separate, independent agency is best. This independent structure permits adoption of the defined philosophy (as outlined in this book) and presents the chance to exercise the authority to make it stick.

Even so, it is not enough simply to state that “separate is best” when dealing with governors, state legislators or other governmental officials. Therefore, this chapter is intended to give background, insight and information on the entire topic of separate, independent agencies for the blind. Workers in the field and the blind themselves need to be prepared to offer cogent and persuasive arguments on the topic.

A. Background: Every state has some form of VR, IL and related training programs for its adult, blind citizens. The federal government pays approximately eighty percent of the costs. The blind receive these adult services in one of two ways: (i) from a large, general VR agency, which purports to serve all people with all types of disabilities; or (2) from a separate agency for the blind, which presumably has more expertise and serves only blind customers.

Then, in turn, if a separate program for the blind is established, it may be either a section or division within a much larger umbrella agency of state government, or it may be a completely separate and independent agency, directly accountable to the governor, the legislature, the blind, and the general citizenry. It is up to each state to determine which governmental structure is best suited to meet the particular needs of its blind citizens.

Congress has recognized that VR and related needs of the blind are unique and, therefore, that meaningful services for the blind are distinctly different from VR

services for people with other disabilities. Accordingly, federal law permits the states to establish a completely separate, independent agency for the blind in order to address these unique needs in a comprehensive, specialized program. The relevant federal law is Title 29 USC, Section 721(a)(2)(A)(i) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

Putting this in terms which are meaningful to those involved in work with the blind, if there is an independent agency for the blind, then Congress permits a state to submit two State Plans to the U.S. Rehabilitation Services Administration. One of these deals specifically with services for all of those disabled persons except the blind, and the second deals with the specialized service program for the blind. If services are provided by lumping people with all disabilities together, then only one State Plan is submitted.

Experience has shown that the blind always have the best possible chance of receiving quality services when such services are delivered through an independent, separate agency. There are numerous reasons for the tremendous success of these independent programs. They are outlined in the sections below.

B. Why a Separate, “Independent” Agency for the Blind? Rehabilitation of the blind has more in common with independent living services for the blind, services for the older blind, orientation and adjustment training for the blind, sight conservation, and sheltered employment for the blind than it does

with rehabilitation of other disability groups or the socially or economically disadvantaged. Likewise, small business enterprise programs for the blind have more in common with rehabilitation services for the blind than they do with other types of small business programs.

Even so, some argue that the blind should be lumped together with other disability groups or served through some giant umbrella agency to achieve integration and coordination of services. Until you think about it carefully and have certain facts presented to you, this might seem like sound, logical thinking.

C. All Rehabilitation is Alike, Isn’t It? There is, indeed, a need for coordination and integration of state services for the blind, but terminology should not be confused with reality. If, for instance, a state has a supervisor of highway construction, a supervisor of elementary education, a supervisor of pest control, and a supervisor of health and welfare, it does not follow that integration and coordination are achieved by creating a Department of Supervisors and lumping all of these people and functions together.

Nor is any real integration or coordination achieved by establishing a Department of Health and Highways. Health is one function, highways another, and they cannot be meaningfully integrated. If such a department is established, all that can be accomplished is to superimpose a costly administrative hierarchy upon the two departments. They will still remain separate functions whether they be called

departments, divisions, sections, bureaus, or whatever. In fact, the administrative hierarchy will be detrimental and will only cause inefficiency and waste in such a situation.

Relating all of this to the blind, fragmentation is increased rather than decreased by putting all of the services for the blind into a division of a superdepartment. What is needed is common sense rather than textbook theory and the neatness of somebody’s organizational chart. Sound reasoning tells us that the various services for the blind complement and supplement one another and form one unique entity. They are only very slightly and incidentally related to services for people with other disabilities or other disadvantaged groups despite the similarity of terminology.

The people who administer VR and other services for the blind should be able to administer the entire package, and they should not be distracted by other duties. Furthermore, they should not be responsible to people who have other program interests and who may, therefore, subordinate the needs of programs for the blind to other interests or pet projects.

D. Who is “Responsible” in an Independent Agency? At the same time, the professional agency for the blind administrator must be responsible to some authority as a check and balance and a testing ground for his or her judgment. This authority should be a lay board that includes knowledgeable blind people themselves—people who know firsthand what the services are and what they should

be to achieve best results.

In those states where separate, independent agencies exist, the governor (often with the advice and consent of the Senate) appoints the members of the lay board. The board hires the director, and the director then hires other staff and provides the leadership and day-to-day management of the program.

On the other hand, if the administrator of programs for the blind is accountable to the head of some superagency or even directly to the governor, he or she is really not responsible to anyone, for these people generally are not knowledgeable about what is or is not needed and are likely to be extremely busy with other matters. Thus, an independent department or commission for the blind administering all state services for the blind is clearly best suited to meet the requirements for a good program.

It is, of course, possible to have an inefficient independent agency just as it is a virtual certainty that you will have an inefficient program under any other type of structure, but the odds are much better for good programs if you have the independent agency system. The efficiency of an agency all depends, of course, upon the caliber and expertise of the people who do the administering. However, if all other things are equal, an independent commission or department affords the best organizational structure.

E. We Need Experts in Blindness:

Let's look at specifics. Even though the same words are sometimes used when we

talk of various service programs, the mere use of such words is where the similarity ends. For example, rehabilitation of people using wheelchairs or who are deaf in no sense calls for the same training processes as rehabilitation and training of the blind. This is equally true when discussing a hundred other types of rehabilitation.

Take me as a simple case in point. I am blind. Literally, the only thing I have in common with people who are deaf or use wheelchairs is the word, disability. This simple similarity does not constitute a justifiable reason for lumping us all together under a giant umbrella intended to "help the disabled."

In other words, the problems facing blind people are unique. From this, it naturally follows that those who are hired to provide VR and related services for blind people must possess an unique reservoir of knowledge specifically related to the problems of blindness if effective programs are to be carried on.

If agencies for the blind are truly to be effective, if they honestly wish to empower, they need experts whose training and experience relate specifically to the problems of blindness. It is sheer nonsense to expect any human being (any general rehabilitation counselor) to be knowledgeable about and to possess the necessary expertise to deal effectively with all of the problems of everyone needing all of the various types of VR services.

Then, in addition to learning to under-

stand blindness and the techniques needed to empower the blind through proper training, consider the rapidly mushrooming issue of specialized, adaptive technology for the blind—technology which has no relevance to people with other disabilities. This topic, alone, should be enough to occupy the mind of the average specialist in work with the blind, and it would be a foolish waste of time for any general VR counselor to spend his or her time acquiring a workable knowledge concerning this new field.

F. There is Also a Human Element: "But," it is sometimes argued, "it is desirable to have the uniformity of administration found in a large superagency." This argument might be made with considerable validity for producing license plates or for regulatory agencies—licensing, permits, etc. Its validity is dubious, however, with respect to human service programs, which for maximum efficiency must operate on a person-to-person basis.

As I have said, the neatness of somebody's organizational chart and uniformity of administrative pattern must not be permitted to obscure the human element. In fact, there is considerable evidence that bigness itself is a negative, not a positive factor.

G. Accountability: "But," it is further argued, "programs for the blind and others which sound alike should be merged into large departments to have accountability and so they will not function in a vacuum and be too independent." In one sense, it might be said that this

submerging of programs for the blind into a superagency might lead to independence but, regrettably, it is not the kind of independence that is needed in an agency which has the empowerment of its customers as an objective. Instead, what results from placement in a superagency is independence from scrutiny, not independence from undesirable interference.

The purported independence which results when the agency is buried within a bureaucracy goes like this: If the blind citizens of the state become unhappy about the poor quality of the services, complaining is pointless, it is like punching a feather pillow. Complain here, and someone pops out to quiet the complaining there. The natural instinct of the bureaucrats both in the programs for the blind and of those of the superagency will be to protect one another. It is possible, of course, that a rare, individual bureaucrat would side with the unhappy blind customers against his or her fellows, but the odds weigh very heavily against it. Nothing at all will likely happen when the unhappy blind customers express their unhappiness.

On the other hand, an independent agency for the blind with a lay board must always operate in the spotlight of inescapable scrutiny, accountability and responsibility. If its programs are good, the blind will support them. If the agency is not functioning well, the blind can and will rise in protest, and there can be no possibility of evasion, no shifting of responsibility, no passing the buck. There is no hierarchy of administrators,

divisions or bureaucrats to stand between unhappy blind customers and the people employed to give them service.

Putting this another way, when you establish a separate, independent agency for the blind with a lay board appointed by the governor, you have checks and balances and the maximum incentive for that agency to do a good job. Submerge services for the blind in a large department, and you give that program a blank check of independence from scrutiny— independence which it should neither want nor have.

Further, placing services for the blind in a larger department of government will necessarily divert the energies and talents of administrators whose training, experience and main professional concerns should be strictly with the blind. Can anyone really doubt what the main professional concerns of the high level administrators of giant, umbrella agencies are? I can assure you that those concerns have nothing to do with blindness or with quality services for blind people.

The blind should not wish to divert the energies or talents of anybody, nor should they wish the agency for the blind's energies and talents to be diverted, watered down or shifted from the course of giving the best possible service to the blind of the state. This is one of the principal reasons why many states have separated their services for the blind from large departments.

This issue of the need for true independence—accountability, authority and

control—must be emphasized as strongly as I can. Also, it must be looked at from a slightly different perspective. I previously have gone to great lengths pointing out that a major factor which accounts for the seventy to eighty percent unemployment rate among blind people of working age in America is that agencies for the blind historically have not been as good as they should be—the performance of some has been dismal at best. I have also pointed out that challenging and moving away from the status quo will be hard. We literally must be working within the agencies to push back the frontiers of ignorance if adult services for the blind are ever to become what they can and should be.

Meeting this goal will require several things: First, it will take an awareness on the part of agency for the blind administrators and personnel that the blind are a minority and that, therefore, agency services must be provided which are aimed at teaching customers a new and constructive set of attitudes about blindness based upon an understanding that prevailing views are wrong and harmful. It will also require an agency administration and staff that have adopted and actively espouse the “defined philosophy” outlined in these pages.

In addition, these administrators must possess a real understanding of blindness and of what it takes to provide the proper training blind people need in order to achieve maximum empowerment and freedom. They must also possess energy and drive, and they must exude passionate commitment to the cause. THEY

MUST TRULY BE INDEPENDENT AND HAVE FREEDOM FROM THE INTERFERENCE OF WELL-MEANING BUT UNKNOWLEDGEABLE SUPERIORS IN SUPERAGENCIES OF STATE GOVERNMENT! In other words, it will take the knowledge and expertise of independent administrators to set proper policies and practices and the requisite power, without interference from others, to make those decisions stick.

H. Direct Legislative and Gubernatorial Contact: One more compelling reason for an independent, state agency must be discussed and emphasized. The independent agency administrator and staff have the freedom to go directly to their Governor and state legislature to deal with budgetary and other issues. Being trapped within a giant umbrella usually means that agency for the blind administrators have their hands tied completely and cannot sell their programs themselves.

I am aware, for example, of a state where VR, IL and related services for the blind are delivered not through an independent agency, but as a part of a general VR program. This program, in turn, is buried deeply within a huge superagency.

For as many as ten years, those in the agency concerned with blindness have known that additional funding was urgently needed, not only for more and better services for the older blind, but also to establish and operate an orientation and adjustment center. Each year, VR includes budget requests for these urgent needs

within its request to its own superagency. However, nothing has ever happened. Since the superagency obviously has no interest in the needs of that state’s blind citizens, these requests have never been included within the superagency’s requests from the Governor and legislature—they have never seen the light of day.

If this isn’t bad enough, VR is then prohibited by its superagency from going directly to the Governor and legislature to fight for its own budgetary needs—only superagency personnel may make these direct contacts. This problem alone should be reason enough to demonstrate to the unsophisticated why it is always poor business to be trapped within a superagency.

I. Will Lumping Everything Together Save Money? “But,” as a last-ditch effort, it is argued by the uninformed, “can’t we save a lot of state and federal money if we just lump together these seemingly related programs? We can avoid duplication and save a bundle.”

While this sounds logical and responsible, the fact is that, where this reorganizing takes place, the same program administrators and managers are generally retained, but, in addition, a new and costly level of administrators is imposed to supervise the original program managers. This practice ultimately costs more, not less.

On the topic of cost, however, we must remember what I said earlier. We aren’t just making license plates. We aren’t just

operating an assembly line which will crank out empowered blind person after empowered blind person ad infinitum. There must be a human element involved if we are truly to empower. To provide this human element, it will take a staff of qualified specialists, and it will also take an investment—one which must be made to achieve desired results.

J. A Wise Investment: To provide the reader with a financially-based technique for justifying quality, independent services, let me relate a story about an argument I once used (you can come up with your own). I was attempting to get a Maryland state senator to understand the benefits of quality VR services for the blind, and he wasn't getting it. He said, "But it's too costly."

So I decided to "set him up" to make a point. I said, "Yes, senator, it is costly. Take my own case. I suspect that the Iowa Commission for the Blind spent as much as twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars on me (remember, this was from 1961 through 1966), sending me through its rehabilitation center and then on to college and law school. That's a lot to spend on one fellow, don't you think."

This figure produced the reaction I had hoped for. He said, "That's outrageous! I don't agree at all that we should be spending that kind of money on a single person."

I agreed that it seemed like a lot, but I asked him to take a minute to listen. "Yes, the Iowa Commission for the Blind invested a lot in me, but do you have any

idea how much money my family and I would have received from society in welfare, medical and disability payments over a lifetime if the investment had not been made?"

He had no idea. I said, "Senator, I've had the need a time or two to do some calculating. If I had not received proper training and become employed and self-supporting, society would have spent from three to four-hundred thousand dollars over the course of my lifetime supporting my family and me."

He was stunned. He then decided to support our legislative asking.

But I said, "Senator, we're not through. Now, do you have any idea how much I will pay in taxes (of all kinds) during my life?"

Again, he didn't, but I had figured that out, too. I said, "Because I am a professional and will have a good income, I will pay between three and four-hundred thousand dollars in all kinds of taxes during the course of my adult life. Therefore, because of that initial investment of around twenty-five thousand dollars, society will be ahead from six to eight-hundred thousand dollars. Not a bad return on an investment in one person, wouldn't you agree!"

Just to wrap it up neatly, however, I went on to say, "This financial picture doesn't tell the entire story either. I can't place a monetary figure on the joy and pride I feel in having the right to go to work each day and to be a taxpayer rather

than a tax user. But I can assure you that the value is immense—you can’t place a dollar figure on that feeling of pride and freedom!” He agreed, we became good friends, and he became a staunch supporter of quality programs for the blind.

Not every case is so dramatic, but everyone in the field who has considered this point agrees that proper rehabilitation is a great investment. This argument is true for quality education, and it is equally true for quality VR and related services. We need to be willing to argue and persuade when it comes to supporting good programs.

K. How Can You Get and/or Keep an Independent Agency?

In this Chapter I have given as much information as I can about the justification for the independent, separate state agency. It is essential that both blindness specialists and members of the organized blind movement have a thorough understanding of these salient points. It is essential, that is, if the agency’s goal is to empower its customers by providing the best services it possibly can. How can governors and state legislators be convinced to establish or retain the independent agency? What tools and resources does an agency have at its disposal to bring about a successful outcome?

Answers to these and similar questions are key, particularly at a time when some government planners, who have no knowledge about or interest in blindness, believe that government can be

streamlined by creating giant, impersonal super bureaucracies.

What is needed for successful political action is a partnership between the state agencies and the blind themselves. What is needed is a constituency which can support the agency in its dealings with governors and legislatures.

The best way—in fact, the only way—to develop a powerful and lasting constituency is to provide high quality services. Interestingly, it is when the agency empowers and brings freedom and normality to large numbers of its blind customers—that is, when it does what it is supposed to do—that a meaningful constituency will emerge.

Here is what I mean. Dr. Fredric K. Schroeder, former Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education, is one of the giants in work with the blind. In January of 2001, he addressed the Millennium Symposium sponsored by the National Federation of the Blind. Among other things, he said the following about constituencies:

I said to that small group from CSAVR (Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation): Here is the problem. Let’s use the analogy of grades, A, B, C, D, etcetera. If you think of the very best services that we can provide as A-level services, the problem that we who run public agencies have is that there are always more people who need help than there are resources to help them. It seems to

me that there is pressure to say, 'Okay, look, we need to be efficient; we need to economize.' But if we do that at the level of the individual, over time we erode the system. It's insidious because, if you first start trimming back just a little bit, you can rationalize to yourself, "Look, we may not be giving A services, but we are giving B plus services, which are still really good services, and by doing this, we are able to serve more people than we otherwise could.'

And, of course, the problem is that there are still more people at the door who need help, so over time you go from B plus to B minus services. And you say, "Look, these are still good services—above-average services. By making these economies, we are able to serve more people." Yet there are still more who need help, so you slip to C services, and you are saying, "But we don't promise people a Cadillac; these are good services, average, typical services. We can't do more because we have so many people who need the help." Maybe you stay at C services; maybe you slip to C minus or D plus services.

The problem is that there will still be more people who need the help; yet, when you go to the state legislature, when you go to the Congress and you ask for the resources, where is your constituency? Are people going to stand up and demand more money for the program when they've got C or C minus or D plus services? Do you want to have a constituency who

stands up and says, 'Well, it did take several months to get a Plan written, and no, they didn't end up buying me the computer or supporting the training I wanted, but I did get a Braille watch, and the counselor was very nice to me and wished he could do more?' That's going to inspire your legislature or Congress to protect you? Of course not. This is not [being] critical. This is politics.

If, on the other hand, you give each client A services—now does A-level service mean wasting money, lavishing money—of course not. These are my tax dollars too . . . We're not talking about wasting money or squandering money or being lavish with money. We are talking about taking risks with money, sometimes doing things that we are not entirely certain will work, but, if we give people A services and there is not enough money to go around, then you've got people demanding access to these services, saying, 'These are vital services. These services change people's lives, and I need them too. Then you have a constituency.

So all of this is to say, in my view, that the future of rehabilitation is certainly dotted with many challenges, but they are different only because of the context, the times in which we live, the new environment. There have always been challenges to the system. I can say to you: Should I ever find myself running a state rehab agency again, I will seek to build an agency that has a constituency. I want the ordinary consumer, the ordinary blind

person to say, ‘By my coming to this agency, my life was changed.’ I don’t think this is just feel-good philosophy. I think this is good rehabilitation practice.

When the agency for the blind and the blind themselves become true partners, they are virtually unstoppable. Experience has shown that when the agency and the blind approach governors or legislatures together to tell the story of the need, people tend to listen. Therefore, it is good business from a practical standpoint to provide those A-quality services. This is the way either to secure or retain the separate, independent agency.

L. Separate and Independent “is” Best! Finally, over the past several years there have been various studies to gather empirical data on the over-all question as to whether or not the independent, separate agency really is provably better—this is what the blind have always claimed based upon actual life experience. In the 1970s, the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) commissioned an independent study (Mallas, 1976) of service delivery systems to determine which type was best suited to provide quality rehabilitation and related services for the blind. Mallas concluded that the separate, independent agency with a lay board appointed by the governor is best.

In an interview Dr. Mallas said, “Where reorganization of services for the blind has taken place on the basis of the economy-of-scale principle, its proponents have sold the legislature and the governor on statements such as, ‘This will be more

efficient and economical. It will let us get more mileage out of every tax dollar.’ As a matter of fact, in every state where such a reorganization has taken place, the prestige and level of operation of the agencies serving the blind have been downgraded.”

This study made another revealing finding: “In general, programs for the blind which fall under rehabilitation departments and umbrella agencies have the least effectiveness in developing and utilizing necessary financial resources.”

The most recent and also the most conclusive study was presented in June, 1999. Dr. Brenda S. Cavenaugh of Mississippi State University studied 35,396 blind people from across the country whose cases were closed as “rehabilitated” in 1995 and 1996 in states with both separate and combined agencies. Her thesis was that consumers and practitioners alike in blindness rehabilitation support the premise that blind persons have unique vocational rehabilitation (VR) needs and, therefore, are best served in separate, identifiable agencies established especially for that purpose. She set out to test this thesis.

Her findings were conclusive, particularly in two areas—areas which are of enormous meaning to our blind customers. First, she found that, in the states with separate agencies, client earnings at time of closure were significantly higher than those served through combined agencies. Second, she found that the competitive placement rate in the separate agency states was also significantly higher.

This study should go a long way toward establishing objectively once and for all that “separate is best!”

M. In Summary: The present unemployment rate of seventy to eighty percent among blind people of working age in America can no longer be ignored or tolerated. The blind of America want to take every positive step possible to reduce drastically this deplorable figure. Also, as a matter of right, they deserve to have the opportunity to receive services aimed at full empowerment and freedom—at returning them to the mainstream of life. They want to be taxpayers, not tax users. The separate, independent agency for the blind offers the best chance for programs which will meet this objective.

Since the blind constitute only about three percent of all people with disabilities, there are only a limited number of dollars available to provide proper services for this unique population. Therefore, these limited dollars should be spent wisely and well by establishing and maintaining the best possible service delivery systems—the separate, independent state agencies for the blind.

THE NATURE OF EMPOWERMENT

A Possible Conflict in Thinking

The “Empowerment Motive”

What is “Empowerment”?

If the very governmental structure of the adult agency for the blind is a major factor in the process of empowering blind customers, and it is, then just contemplate the significance of the personal attitudes and motives of specialists in the field of work with the blind toward their customers. **THEY ARE CRITICAL!**

A. A Possible Conflict in Thinking: Some years ago I was asked to do consulting work for the New Mexico Commission for the Blind—to hold a training program for its staff members. As I was developing information to present on how best the agency’s staff members should work with their customers to make sure that those customers could reasonably expect to have productive, empowered lives, I was struck by the thought that I might have a contradiction in my own notions about the real role of employees of service agencies or schools for the blind. To “set up” the situation which gave rise to my apparent conflict, at the same time I was preparing for my New Mexico presentation, I had also been working in Arizona along with other blind people to secure adoption of a comprehensive Braille literacy policy for blind youngsters. We had encountered stubborn resistance against our literacy effort from a group of professionals involved in the education of blind children. Through the years, I had met other people like these negative and arrogant types—specialists whose demeanor and attitude toward the blind say very loudly, “Don’t bother us with the facts. We are professionals, and we know what is best for you.”

“We know what is best for you.” It was this tiresome, condescending and oppressive attitude, then, which was on my mind as I worked to develop the presentation for the New Mexico agency staff. And then the apparent contradiction in thinking struck me. For, in truth, employees of quality school programs and adult agencies for the blind really do know what is best for their customers—they have to, because the fact is that the customer who is new to the school or VR system has no reason to know anything about it and truly has no idea what kind of service or training is needed—he or she has nothing by which to measure, no perspective. The school or agency specialist literally must function as a valuable resource and as an aggressive salesperson if true empowerment is to be the result!

Just consider: The new student or customer doesn’t know about the wide range of positive possibilities which exist for the blind who have had proper training. He or she must be taught and often persuaded by someone who does know. The new customer doesn’t know, for example, why it is so very important in the adjustment to blindness process to learn to use the word “blind,” rather than actively to continue in denial. He or she must be persuaded by someone who truly knows and understands the importance of the customer’s acceptance of and adjustment to blindness.

Similarly, the newly blinded adult doesn’t know that prevocational training in a residential orientation and adjustment center is always preferable to training in a

daytime-only program. This new customer does not know why it is important to use the long, white cane rather than a short one; why sleepshades are necessary for the partially blind person during training; or why Braille and other alternative techniques are so important. Someone who really knows and cares must convince the blind person of these and a myriad of other facts and truths.

All of the foregoing is simply the way that it is in the real world. Even more, this persuasion and convincing usually must be achieved in spite of the fear and stubborn reluctance of the blind student or rehabilitant involved. This is so since the average blind person will have fallen squarely into the trap of social conditioning. Because of the overwhelming negative public attitudes which exist, he or she will believe that there is really nothing of significance which a blind person can do. Therefore, the offered educational or adult, state services will appear to be totally useless and irrelevant specifically for him or her, if not impossible to achieve.

So there you have the dilemma and the apparent contradiction in my thinking about the proper role of employees of service providers. What is the difference between the proper, indeed, the essential conduct of informed professionals I have described here and the arrogant and condescending attitude of those professionals who cavalierly brush the blind aside and who say, “We know what is best for you?” Clearly there IS a difference—an enormous difference!

B. The “Empowerment Motive”:

After considerable thought on the topic, I have concluded that this difference has to do with the true motives and attitudes toward the customer of the blindness specialist involved. If the motive of the specialist is truly and solely to help the blind individual achieve maximum success—the “empowerment motive”—then the action or attitude is proper. On the other hand, when certain misguided specialists exercise their “we know what is best for you” attitude—the “power motive”—for the purpose of exerting power and control over their customers, thus maintaining intact their feelings of superiority and authority, such behavior is not proper.

“Where on earth,” you ask, “would this attitude of superiority and condescension come from?” In my view, it flows from the old notion that “everybody has to feel superior to somebody.” To be sure, not every human being exhibits this trait, but some do. I don’t contend for a minute that this attitude is proper, or even acceptable, but I believe that this feeling exists in some people. Referring back to our discussion of negative and erroneous attitudes about the blind in Chapter II, the blind as a class are prime targets for someone’s misplaced feelings of superiority. Therefore, some people who are bent on exerting power over those whom they perceive as the inferior, hapless blind, sadly find their way into work with the blind.

C. What is “Empowerment”? If I contend that the proper role, indeed, the essential role of quality blindness

specialists is truly to strive for the full empowerment of their customers, and I do, then just what is empowerment? I checked the dictionary for its meaning, and I wasn’t totally satisfied with what I found. It says, “To give power or authority to.”

This definition is all right as far as it goes, but I believe that as the word is used in the field of work with the blind today, the meaning is broader. I submit that, for the blind customer, a more useful definition would go something like this: A service provider may be said to have “empowered” a blind customer to the extent that that customer is provided with the best possible tools—the emotional adjustment, the mastery of the alternative techniques, the ability to cope calmly with the misconceptions of others and the ability to blend into the broader society—which are essential to enable the blind person truly to take control of his or her life and to become the best that he or she is capable of becoming.

The employees of quality programs know what it takes to empower, and they also know how properly to involve the blind customer in decision making. In trying to achieve this desired objective, if the blindness specialist approaches the customer only for the purpose of exercising power—from the “power motive”—then this action is always wrong no matter what the outcome may be. On the other hand, if the specialist does what he or she does honestly for the sole purpose of empowering the blind person—from the “empowerment motive”—then it is always right no matter

what happens. It is this kind of service which will enable the customer to take control of his or her life.

One additional point needs to be made in discussing those employees who work honestly from the empowerment motive to help their customers become the very best that they can be. It is essential that these employees possess the capacity to love the customers with whom they are working. If they don't, the task at hand will often seem too difficult, and the employee will simply become one more disinterested bystander. The great service provider will love those customers even when their personalities or actions may be unlovely.

I earnestly hope we are approaching that day when all those who enter work with the blind will truly act only for the purpose of empowerment—no axes to grind, no pseudo science to which to try to give validity, no wounded pride to protect. All persons who are blind have the right to take control of their own lives and to become the best that they can be. The quality service provider must see to it that the tools which are needed for full empowerment are provided routinely. To achieve this objective, the school or agency employee must take the time to learn what it means and what it takes to provide full empowerment for the average customer. Then, this employee needs something else—passion! He or she must have a passionate and burning desire to make a difference!

Properly understood, there really is no contradiction in thinking about the

proper role of quality service providers as they work vigorously to encourage and persuade customers to take advantage of essential services. There surely is, however, a monumental difference between those specialists whose primary motivation is to exercise power over their customers and those who honestly strive to empower by advocating for and providing proper training! If there are those reading this book who have a compelling need to exert power over somebody, then I urge you to seek another calling!

INFORMED CHOICE AND THE “EMPOWERMENT CIRCLE”

Vocational Rehabilitation History

*The History of
“Informed Choice”*

The Problem with Choice

*The Solution to the Problem—
The “Empowerment Circle”*

To choose or not to choose or, more accurately, what to choose? That is the question—the question for the new vocational rehabilitation (VR) customer.

In recent years, far too many blind customers of the VR system have been shortchanged because they have chosen unwisely—they have not known how or what to choose. They have actually made uninformed choices. As a result, without ever even knowing it, they have sold themselves short and have failed to become empowered.

A. Some Vocational Rehabilitation History: Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for people with disabilities became a national effort in America in 1920, but it did not include the blind at all. Apparently it was assumed that the blind had no rehabilitation potential and, thus, could not become employable. The original law, the Smith-Fess Act, established the National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 66-236).

By 1943, as blinded veterans were coming home from the Second World War, the blind were finally included in VR programs and assumed to have at least some kind of employment potential. The 1943 law which brought the blind into the state/federal VR programs was the Barden-LaFollette Act (P.L. 78-113).

In those eighty years since VR was inaugurated in the United States, and in the fifty-seven years since the blind were included within VR programs, many new concepts have come along, and doubtless many have gone. Also, it goes without

saying, that there have been times when nothing short of mass confusion has been the order of the day.

However, no concept in the VR process has ever been more confused, misunderstood, twisted and misused than that of “Informed Choice”! Since the concept has been so confused and misapplied, large numbers of blind VR customers actually have been hurt rather than helped by what was intended to be a positive plan -of grand design.

B. The History of “Informed Choice”: The concept of informed choice was first introduced to the United States Congress and to those involved in the field of work with the blind by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in 1990. At that time, a few—only a few—orientation and adjustment centers around the country were consistently providing high quality, proper training—they knew the secret of full empowerment for the blind—and taught it regularly. The fact was, however, that most training centers didn’t understand what proper training really was, let alone provide it.

The NFB argued that a blind customer—no matter in which state he or she happened to live—should have the right to choose to go at VR expense to an orientation and adjustment center which offered proper training and full empowerment, so the proposal went to Congress. No action was taken in 1990, but the seed was planted.

The blind of the NFB worked hard, and by the time Congress passed the 1992 VR

Amendments, the first “choice” provision was put into the Act (The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended). In the 1998 Rehabilitation Act amendments, the “informed choice” provision was strengthened and stated much more strongly. The concept caught on, and it was used, and it became confused, and then it began to be misused. Now, as some people put it so descriptively, “It is as clear as mud.”

C. The Problem with Choice: What, then, is “informed choice”? It simply means that the customer is to be treated with dignity and respect—as an equal partner—with the service provider. Unlike the old days when the VR counselor simply made decisions and then told the passive customer what to do, the customer now has the right fully to participate in the planning and decision making.

In addition to selecting the employment objective and the broad range of needed services, the customer also generally has the right to choose which orientation and adjustment center program he or she would like to attend. Further, the customer may generally choose the university or vocational training program, if any, from which he or she would like to receive vocational training.

The customer does not, however, have the right to tell a program how it should run its business. In other words, the customer cannot compel a VR vendor to change the nature of its services. If the customer does not like some aspect of a given training program, then he or she

should choose a program which offers what is wanted. (See RSA Policy Directive 01-03.)

To clarify the point, let's look at a couple of simple analogies. I decided to become an attorney, so I chose to go to law school and to attend Loyola University of Chicago. I did not choose which of the core curriculum classes to take. The University chose what it would teach me, and how it would do it. I could have chosen to go to some other law school, but each in turn would have chosen what and how to teach me and how I would be expected to dress, behave, participate and what I would study.

Or, to illustrate absurdity by being absurd, try this one on for size: How would you react if your youngster were to come home from school some day and say, “Hey, Dad, we have this new thing in school. It's called ‘CHOICE.’ I get to decide whether or not to take English or spelling or history or math or science. It's really cool! Hey, Dad, I choose recess!”

Idiotic? You bet! But a valid analogy? Absolutely. Obviously, there are certain presumptions in this world. Whether we are going to law school or grade school or high school or night school, or to an orientation and adjustment center for the blind, it is presumed that those who run the schools and training centers know more about what is needed and how to achieve the objective than those who attend the programs. If they don't, then the roles should be reversed and the administrators had better become the students.

“So,” you ask, “What in the world does all of this nonsense have to do with blind VR customers and informed choice?” **EVERYTHING!** In the confusion and turmoil which now exist, customers attending orientation and adjustment centers for the blind incorrectly believe that they have the right not only to make the choice to attend a particular prevocational program but also to make choices as to whether or not they will take all core classes. They mistakenly believe that they may decide whether or not to stay all day, use and carry white canes, take and use Braille or use sleepshades during training, etcetera. Worse still, too many rehabilitation counselors, rehabilitation teachers and training center personnel have also bought into the erroneous notion that this is what the NFB proposed and Congress approved when it offered VR customers a choice. This, of course, is absurd!

There is an even more dubious aspect to this entire mess. The customers of VR obviously have learned this mistaken view about choice from someone since they would have had no reason to have the slightest piece of knowledge on the subject. No doubt, they will never have heard of the phrase, “informed choice,” until they have begun working with their VR agencies. I believe that the customers have learned and are learning this erroneous view from the professionals in the field—the very rehab counselors, rehab teachers and training center personnel whose sole reason for being is to help the blind adjust properly to their blindness.

Chaos has been the result. But, even

more than that, when service and training personnel not only gave up their right but also failed in their responsibility to set the curriculum needed to provide proper training—to empower their customers—those customers have become the losers. They have been short-changed by the very programs which have been created to provide meaningful help. Since such customers have had little or no adequate guidance, far too many have chosen unwisely and thus have failed to get the kind of proper training which they have really needed.

To spell it out bluntly and to emphasize and expand upon the point made in the fifth chapter, the customer who is new to the blindness system has no foundation upon which to make an informed choice about anything dealing with proper training or adjustment to blindness. He or she has nothing by which to measure, no knowledge upon which to exercise sound judgment, no perspective. A person who has never been exposed to the blindness system wouldn't even understand the terminology.

Just consider: The new student or customer doesn't know about the wide range of possibilities which exist for the blind who have had the right kind of training. That customer doesn't know that a properly trained blind person can live a normal, happy, productive life. He or she must be taught and often persuaded by someone who does know. The new customer doesn't know, for example, why it is so very important in the adjustment to blindness process to learn to use the word "blind," rather than actively to continue

to engage in denial. He or she must be persuaded by someone who truly knows and understands the importance of the customer's acceptance of and adjustment to blindness.

Similarly, the newly blinded adult doesn't know that prevocational training in a residential orientation and adjustment center is always preferable to training in a daytime-only program. This new customer does not know why it is important to use the long, white cane rather than a short one; why sleepshades are necessary for the partially blind person during training; or why Braille and other alternative techniques are so important. Someone who really knows and cares must convince the blind person of these and a myriad of other facts and truths.

All of the foregoing is simply the way that it is in the real world, and no amount of hoping or wishing that it isn't so can change it. To complicate the issue even further, usually, of course, all of this persuasion and convincing must be accomplished in spite of the fear and stubborn reluctance of the blind customer involved. As I pointed out in Chapter V, because of the prevailing, negative attitudes about blindness, the typical new, adult VR customer will have bought into the trap of social conditioning. He or she will believe that there is nothing which can be done as a blind person and that, therefore, the offered state services are totally useless and irrelevant to him or her, if not impossible to achieve. He or she will have been taught since infancy that blindness means inferiority, and this attitude usually will not change until the

quality service provider—the provider who is operating from the “empowerment motive”—intervenes and helps to change it.

Dr. Fredric K. Schroeder, former Commissioner of the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration, told a marvelous story about choice at a training seminar for Arizona rehabilitation professionals. “When I went to work in Washington,” he said, “I was asked by a personnel official if I would like to choose a federal health insurance plan. I said that I would like that. The personnel specialist and I went into a room and began picking up packets of information about my various options.”

Commissioner Schroeder continued, “We took a large stack of books and pamphlets back to my office, and I began to sort through them. Then I said, ‘This is ridiculous. I’m not going to read all of this stuff!’

“I went to a colleague—an employee who had worked for RSA for several years—and asked him if he had federal health insurance. He said that he did, and he told me which policy he had. I asked him if he liked it, and he said, ‘I do like it,’ so I said, ‘Me too,’ and I signed up for what he had.

“I then asked my secretary to take a copy of each piece of paper having to do with all of the federal health plans and to weigh the whole stack. She did. It weighed thirteen pounds! This was great. I had thirteen pounds of choice about my healthcare plan! Of course, until I asked

for information from a trusted colleague, I had no rational basis whatsoever for making a sound decision.”

This story should make the point. As with former Commissioner Schroeder, the customer who is new to the blindness system has no rational basis whatever for choosing the right adjustment program to attend or the right classes to take while in the center program. The employees of the quality service provider—those with the “empowerment motive”—must teach and lead and demonstrate and persuade in order to help elevate the new VR customer’s expectations and to sell him or her on that proper training which can reasonably be expected to result in empowerment.

D. The Solution to the Problem—The “Empowerment Circle”: Two questions arise on the topic of how best to equip the customer to make an informed choice—the kind of choice which will lead to true empowerment for the blind. First, what is the real role in the real world of the professional as it relates to informed choice and the right adjustment center to attend? Should that professional remain neutral, and, like a robot, simply hand the customer thirteen pounds of paper, or should the professional learn what it takes to empower a blind person, learn which center or centers offer proper training and then do his or her very best positively to influence the choice which the customer makes? At that same Arizona rehabilitation seminar, former Commissioner Schroeder answered the question concerning the real role of the professional directly and unequivocally.

"A rehabilitation professional," he said, "absolutely has an appropriate role to play in the choice process by giving the very best information he or she can possibly provide The professional ought not remain silent on the issue of the type of services which will empower the customer The professional ought truly to help the individual to make an 'informed choice.' . . . Informed choice does not mean that a professional must simply sit passively when a customer comes in and says, 'This is what I want' and think, 'That's a terrible idea, but under choice, I'm not allowed to say anything.' . . . That is nonsense! That is not at all what 'choice' is about! That type of behavior will simply get you thirteen pounds of meaningless paper!"

Another question has to do with the role, if any, which the organized blind should rightfully play in the process of "choice." Should the organized blind have any role? Yes! In addition to doing his or her very best to direct the new customer toward training which will lead to empowerment, the blindness professional who understands and is truly committed to full empowerment will also routinely refer that new customer to the local chapter of the organized blind movement. The new customer needs successful blind role models, and he or she also needs a support group. Further, that new customer needs the inspiration and encouragement which flow naturally from being a part of the collective community of successful blind people.

Let me be very clear about the point I am making here. Some VR agencies bring in a speaker every month or two to

talk to new customers for a half hour or so about his or her organization of the blind. This is not what I am talking about!

The entire point of this chapter is that we have come to that place in history where the seventy to eighty percent unemployment rate among the blind is absolutely unacceptable. If we are honestly interested in successful outcomes, we must deal with the real world as it is, not with fiction. We must recognize and accept the reality that the mere fact that a person has become blind did not bring with it any great insight into blindness. Therefore, "choice" in a vacuum is pointless. The very best way for that new customer to have a real chance to exercise "choice" meaningfully is to associate with people who have themselves been through the process and who can, therefore, give perspective and meaningful opinions, valid opinions.

The views of these veteran VR customers will be based upon the experiences—both the good and the bad—which they and their friends have had. The new customer can then judge for himself or herself whether those experiences are relevant—whether those experiences relate to the goals and ambitions he or she has.

A friend from Tucson tells a great story on this point. He went blind overnight in Illinois, and he needed help, since he knew nothing about blindness. He quickly applied for VR services and within two days, a VR counselor (a blind person) came to my friend's home to see him.

Among other things the counselor said, “It is critical that you meet and associate yourself with other blind people. Here is information about both the American Council of the Blind (ACB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). Check them out, and join something so you can learn perspective from other blind people!”

My friend visited and then joined the NFB. He says that, while Illinois VR gave him some home teaching and other services, it was through the NFB that his expectations rose and his road to true empowerment began in earnest.

To close the loop completely on what I’ll call the empowerment circle, the next step is for that new customer not only to become aware of, but also to get outside of himself or herself and become actively involved in the organized blind movement. His or her personal empowerment will truly be completed by getting involved and helping to make life better for all blind people. Soon, this new individual will be the veteran inspiring and encouraging and giving hope to yet another newer member. This new role for the customer will, in and of itself, be empowering, since one gains enormously by giving back! The unbiased rehabilitation professional with no axes to grind—the professional operating from the empowerment motive—will routinely encourage such activity.

The current Director of the Louisiana Center for the Blind, Joanne Wilson, reports dramatic VR outcomes when the empowerment circle has been closed

through active participation in the NFB. An informal study (a formal one will be conducted later) reveals that ninety-seven percent of her students are successful, when they become actively involved in the organized blind movement after they have completed training—when the loop on the empowerment circle has been closed. What a far cry this is from the nationwide seventy to eighty percent unemployment rate.

The truth about blindness is known: The secret about “how best to empower the blind” has long been known; the techniques for instilling that truth about blindness in the new customer are known; and the question of how to deal appropriately with the negative public attitudes about blindness is known. All of this has been tried, tested and proven over and over again.

What remains is for large numbers of specialists in the field of work with the blind who operate from the “empowerment motive” to learn about proper training and to become passionately committed to full empowerment for their blind customers. Only then will these professionals be able to pass on accurate information so that rank-and-file customers across the country literally can make “informed choices” about their lives.

Those who have mistakenly believed that the concept of informed choice gives the customer the right to pick and choose only certain parts of a program’s curriculum obviously have focused only upon the word, “choice.” As we have seen in this chapter, however, the word,

“informed,” is of at least equal significance. A choice, without information and perspective—an uninformed choice—is utterly meaningless. Even worse, it will most likely be devastating to the success and wellbeing of the customer!

In the five chapters which follow, we will dig into what to choose and how truly to empower. We will examine the real nuts and bolts which go into proper training for the blind.

PROPER TRAINING: WHAT IS IT?

What's in a Word?

A Definition of Proper Training

Expectations

Independence

*Specialized Training
Units for the Blind*

*Proper Training and
Educational Programs*

*Orientation Centers as
“Dumping Grounds”*

To this point in this book, we have defined blindness and determined who is blind. We have learned the facts—the truth—about blindness and why a service provider must have a “defined philosophy.” We have looked at the facts about the real possibilities which exist for properly trained blind people. We have learned that the blind are perceived generally in our society as inferiors—as a minority—and that, therefore, the services we provide must be aimed at teaching our customers a new and constructive set of attitudes about blindness based upon the understanding that the prevailing views are wrong and harmful. We have come to understand that we must have specialists in work with the blind who are committed and motivated by an honest desire and passion to empower, and we have learned how accurately to help our adult customers choose the kind of adjustment to blindness services they need to enable them to take control of their own lives.

Once we have mastered these background materials, we are ready to launch into a detailed discussion of proper training—those unique services which have been shown through real life experiences to provide true empowerment and freedom for large numbers of rank-and-file blind people. This and the following four chapters will dig into the secrets of proper training.

For more than forty years, the members of the National Federation of the Blind have proclaimed the simple yet profound truth that, “Given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place

of business and can do it as well as his or her sighted neighbor.”

As I have stated previously, every day thousands of properly trained blind men and women go to work successfully in high quality jobs as farmers and factory workers, machinists and maintenance men, as college professors, public school teachers, chemists and other scientists, attorneys, mechanics, insurance or real estate agents, businessmen and women of all types, cooks, dishwashers and laborers or legislators. In fact, when someone says, “Here is a job the blind can’t do,” you can find a blind person doing just that. These people and thousands like them do not have their jobs because of charity and goodness in the world. They are competing with their sighted peers on terms of absolute equality.

Why? What is different in the lives of people like those I have just listed and the seventy to eighty percent of America’s working age blind people who are unemployed and sitting at home in desperation and despair? The difference is attitude! The difference is that proper training which results in full empowerment and freedom. For people like these, the stereotypes of blindness have been shattered, and the cycle of dependency has been broken.

Through the years, the proper training truth quoted above has sometimes been abbreviated, and the blind say something like, “With proper training and opportunity, blindness can be reduced to the level of a mere nuisance or inconvenience.” No matter how you state it, though, it must be

understood that PROPER is the operative word in this fundamental truth.

Just as an aside, before turning to a full discussion of proper training, let’s take a look at how some critics distort what I am saying. In purportedly restating this proper training truth, they say something like, “Those people in the Federation say blindness is just a nuisance...,” or “Blindness is no big deal, blind people can do anything.” They make these and similar statements in a derogatory and impugning manner.

These critics erroneously misstate this philosophy (either through malice or ignorance) by leaving out that all-important operative concept, “PROPER TRAINING.” This omission completely changes the point and validity of the philosophical statement and this chapter.

A. What’s in a Word? “So,” you ask, “What is so important about this word, proper? Can’t we really state the same truth by simply saying; Given training and opportunity, the average blind person..., etcetera.”

I earnestly wish that it were so, but we can’t! Distressing as it is, I personally know thousands of blind people from across this land who could be said to have had training, but no one could reasonably argue that these individuals are independent, self-sufficient or successful blind people. Far from it! The facts are that even though they have had some type of training, that training wasn’t meaningful; it wasn’t proper! As a result, blindness for them is much more than a

PROPER TRAINING: WHAT IS IT?

nuisance or inconvenience. Blindness, without proper training, can be a veritable hell!

Why the word, "proper?" Couldn't we use some other equally descriptive adjective? I am certain that we could. As I stated in the discussion of "alternative techniques" in Chapter II, Section G, I selected the word because it is the one the blind themselves have chosen. This is also true with the word "proper." We could just as well have said, "Given empowerment training, etcetera," or "Given superior training, etcetera." The simple fact is that some appropriate adjective is needed, and the blind have selected "proper." Therefore, I have opted to use it.

Let me point out but two actual examples of the problems we face when there may well have been some type of training, but not proper training. In the summer and fall of 1999, the NFB was conducting a technology training program in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Labor. The project was to be a simple one. State rehabilitation agencies for the blind from around the country would send previously trained and well-adjusted blind people to Baltimore, Maryland, to the National Center for the Blind for three weeks of intensive training on the latest high tech, adaptive equipment for the blind.

The NFB would then partner with major employers, and good jobs for these highly trained and competent blind people were to be a virtual certainty. However, the project as it was originally envisioned was not as successful as had been expected. There was a major flaw in the premise: It

was naturally assumed by the NFB and the Department of Labor that the trainees sent to Baltimore by the state agencies would be blind people who were competent, independent and in every way adjusted to their blindness.

It turned out, however, that this assumption simply was not correct. In far too many cases, the trainees sent by their VR agencies were actually in desperate need of fulltime "adjustment to blindness" training in a quality residential orientation and adjustment center. This adjustment to blindness service clearly was needed before the proposed technology training could be of any real and lasting benefit. These individuals had had previous training, but not proper training. As a result, the entire project had to be re-examined and revised.

At virtually the same time, a small Arizona agency undertook to provide very similar training, and it even had a similar partnering contractual agreement. Its experience paralleled that of the NFB. As the Director of the project asked me, "Where are all of these competent blind people you're always talking about?"

In both cases (there are many more examples I could cite), the need for proper training became abundantly clear. Mere training, without the ingredients which go into proper training is generally useless, although the uninformed observer will naturally assume that any training which has been provided by a school or agency for the blind will be sufficient.

B. A Definition of Proper Training: What, then, is this proper training? It is having been provided with that combination of techniques which empower: Training which provides the best possible tools—the emotional adjustment, the mastery of the alternative techniques, the ability to cope calmly with the misconceptions of others and the ability to blend into the broader society—which are essential to enable the customer truly to take control of his or her life and to become the best that he or she is capable of becoming. Full empowerment leads to real independence and self-sufficiency—to freedom.

While this statement of outcome may seem simple enough, those ingredients which are essential to the achievement of true independence and self-sufficiency cannot be taken for granted or viewed casually. Here is where real knowledge and expertise enter the mix.

For many years—in my case, for about forty years—those of us involved in the organized blind movement who have also been seriously involved in the education of children or the rehabilitation of adults, have pointed out that there are three fundamental ingredients, three things every blind person needs in order to achieve that desired goal of true independence and self-sufficiency, and it naturally and logically follows that educational programs for blind youngsters or orientation and adjustment centers for blind adults must undertake to provide these three elements as a routine part of their services.

Here they are:

- (i) The blind person must come emotionally, not just intellectually, to know that he or she truly can be independent and self-sufficient;
- (2) The blind person must really learn and become competent in those skills—the alternative techniques of blindness—which will make it possible for him or her truly to be independent and self-sufficient; and
- (3) The blind person must learn to cope on a daily basis with the public attitudes about blindness—with those things which will be said or done to him or her because of other people's misunderstandings and misconceptions.

These, then, are the three ingredients which I had always understood to be essential to proper training. However, toward the end of the twentieth century, based upon a lifetime of work and thought in this field, I began to understand that a previously unenunciated FOURTH INGREDIENT is just as important as the three I have always advocated.

It is this: (4) Even when the blind individual has adjusted emotionally to blindness, even when the alternative techniques have been mastered and even when he or she has learned to cope effectively with the demeaning things other people do or say, the blind person must also learn to “blend in” and to be acceptable to others. He or she must be punctual, reliable, neat and appropriate in appearance and possessed of good social

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and table manners, and the like. Since the ordinary blind person needs to learn to blend in and to be acceptable to society for maximum success, the schools and agencies must do the very best that they can to make sure that this desired result is achieved.

It is these four ingredients, then, which constitute the essence of proper training and which lead to full empowerment—what a blind friend of mine refers to as, “that freedom thing.” In the four chapters which follow, each will be considered in detail. However, before discussing these four specific training areas, several other issues of general relevance and interest to all four ingredients must be examined.

C. Expectations: If a blind person is provided with proper training by his or her school or VR agency, there is no reason why he or she cannot be independent and fully self-sufficient. However, in order to achieve this desired outcome, it is imperative that the level of the expectations of the average customer be raised to allow for the possibilities which are in line with the truth about blindness as it is presently understood and set forth in this book. The reality is that, generally, you become what you believe.

When I state that the properly trained blind person can compete on terms of absolute equality with the average sighted person, can have a high quality job and can have a meaningful, successful and satisfying life, I mean exactly that. However, the customer who is newly blinded or the customer who has been blind for a long time but who has never

had proper training, won’t understand or believe a single word of what I have just said.

This new customer will have bought into the myths of the hierarchy of sight and the helplessness and incompetence—the inferiority—of the blind. He or she will believe generally that there is nothing of much use which a blind person can do. This customer will sincerely believe that blindness presents major limitations and barriers for him or her and will not understand at all that most human limitations in this world are “self-imposed.” There is nothing more limiting and devastating for a blind customer than to be trapped in the prison of low expectations.

Since all of this is simply the way that it is in the real world, customers will limit themselves to the point where they will have not only low but virtually no expectations. They will sell themselves short and never realize it until some form of positive intervention occurs!

In these circumstances, two parallel processes must be involved. First, the staff members of the quality educational or VR training program must know, understand and believe in the philosophy outlined in this chapter. Then, their teaching in the school or training center programs must reflect this understanding and be put together with high expectations commensurate with the talents and abilities of each customer.

The second part of the equation is for specialists to help customers raise their

own level of expectations. The higher the expectations they have for themselves the better they will do.

All too often, however, we actually get the exact opposite throughout the blindness system. Staff expectations in schools or orientation centers are much too low, and the customer suffers accordingly. As a colleague recently put it, “If a specialist aims low and tells a customer that he or she will be doing well with the simple ability to get his or her own mail independently following training, and then if the customer is able to do that—just that, then he or she will not have progressed to maximum potential because of low expectations.” However, the customer will think that much progress has been made and will express satisfaction with the service he or she has received.

For example (I could cite countless others), one of the areas in which this negative instruction occurs has to do with timed tests. It is common in schools or even in adult VR programs to offer the option or to advise customers to ask for extra time. Without thinking of the negative ramifications, the specialist who has advised such instruction has actually taught the customer that, because of blindness, he or she should never expect to be able to compete on terms of equality with people who are sighted. This, of course, is nonsense and is precisely the wrong instruction to be giving concerning expectations.

President George W. Bush has addressed this issue of expectations head on. He

referred to the kind of professional failings I’m talking about here as “The soft bigotry of low expectations.”

I can assure you that my state agency taught us to insist upon taking tests within the same time limits offered to the sighted. When I took my college and law school exams, my attorney’s bar exam, and the Federal Service Entrance Exam, I insisted upon equal treatment, and I received it.

Another area in which far too many schools and state agencies teach their customers low expectations and to sell themselves short—where they practice soft bigotry—has to do with certain types of classes either in high school or college. I know lots of blind people who have been advised, “Stay away from classes which require a lot of reading. You won’t be able to keep up.” Or, “You can get out of labs or gym class if you want. It won’t hurt anything.”

But, of course, it does hurt. It teaches low expectations. Also, if the customer actually “gets out of” certain classes, this will be hard to explain to a prospective employer who is reviewing a resume and grade transcripts. In considering the applicant for a job, the interviewer will necessarily be thinking, “I wonder what I would have to excuse him from doing on my job.”

Sometimes, insidious and destructive practices creep into educational or training programs virtually unnoticed. When I assumed the directorship of the Alaska Center for Blind Adults, for instance, I was utterly shocked during my second

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or third day on the job. I happened to be walking through the reception area when I overheard the secretary asking a student who was going shopping—an adult, “Do you have the purse?”

The student was leaving to walk to a nearby grocery store to buy something for cooking class. When he was gone, I asked the secretary to tell me about the purse.

“Well,” she said, “We want to be sure that the students don’t get the center’s money mixed up with their own, so we send the little purse along with them.”

I said, “Has it not occurred to you that we are supposed to be in the business of training blind adults to become independent and to take control of their own lives. Instead, what we are doing here with the purse and some other activities I’ve observed is teaching the exact opposite—that these students are tiny children who cannot be trusted even to keep track of money or change.”

That evening I got the entire staff together and discussed this and two or three similar practices. I pointed out that we must have high expectations and treat our customers as normal adults. I also pointed out that I had certain expectations for the staff—that they demonstrate the capacity to change their own attitudes. If they couldn’t, I suggested that they might inquire about employment somewhere else.

If the customer has been taught to have high expectations and has also been taught

about and learned self discipline, then he or she will go to work expecting to compete and not only to survive, but also to succeed. Such a worker is the kind most employers want to find and hire.

I can’t resist telling an amusing, personal story here. I learned high expectations and lots of personal discipline at the Iowa Commission for the Blind. I was prepared to work hard, and this got me through college and law school with flying colors. The interesting story, however, took place in Washington, D.C., on my first job with the National Labor Relations Board. Since I had experienced lots of difficulty because of bias against the blind in securing that first job, I must confess that I worked extremely hard to create a good record for myself and for other blind people. Even so, I was quite surprised one day when a small delegation of sighted lawyers came into my office to chat with me. By and by, they got around to the purpose of the visit. They asked if I would be willing to slow down and not produce so much. They thought it made them look bad if a blind attorney produced more work than they did.

I didn’t slow down—I couldn’t afford to do it. I explained about the difficulty I had experienced in getting that first job because of my blindness. I told them how important it was for me, personally, to build a great record. I also told them, however, that I was keenly aware that the record I was building was not mine alone. What I did would impact favorably, or unfavorably, upon future blind NLRB attorneys. Once they understood my motivation, they were encouraging, and

we became fast friends. Who knows, it might just be that this entire incident also encouraged them to try a little harder and to produce just a little more.

In these circumstances it is not difficult to understand just why it was that, when I left the Washington office of the NLRB to assume my new Field Attorney position in New York city, the LRB actively recruited and ultimately hired another blind attorney to fill my Washington position. In another section of this book I'll go into much more detail about how very important it is for a blind employee to do well in breaking down the barriers of ignorance and fear in the minds of employers. The attitude toward blindness which we as blind employees create in the workplace—whether good or bad—will have a great deal to do with whether other blind people do or do not get jobs.

Let me touch briefly upon one final example of a problem area—college and university disabled student's offices and the manner in which they are usually managed because of the ADA. These offices doubtless were created with the best of intentions, and they may be useful and even necessary for students with certain disabilities. For the blind, however, they have been disastrous. Students are made to be dependent and high expectations are crushed. Because of a misinterpretation of the intent of the ADA, the disabled student's office, not the blind student, arranges for needed textbooks, hires readers, handles registration for classes and the like. Sometimes this office even works out testing arrangements with professors. The blind student should learn

to do these things for himself or herself. Learned dependence is the result.

To compound this destructive situation, many schools and agencies for the blind then encourage the blind college student to rely upon these services. When the student graduates from college, of course, he or she is totally helpless and incompetent—virtually unemployable. The problem is that the concepts of and distinctions between civil rights and custodialism have become mixed and blurred.

These are but a few examples of practices which create dependence and destroy high expectations to make the point about what service providers should not do. We are interested in empowerment through rising expectations. Therefore, it is essential that employees of schools or orientation and adjustment centers learn the facts—the truth—about blindness. This necessarily includes coming to have high expectations for our customers. Then, we must work on ways to instill high expectations in those with whom we are working. A simple truth is that the blindness specialist will usually begin the process with much higher expectations for the customer than the customer will have for himself or herself.

I conclude this section on expectations with a simple analogy to make a point and offer a caveat. The point is touchy because it may be misunderstood by some, but I believe it needs to be made. If you have a race horse which is acting like a mule, then you must do what you can to motivate the race horse to act like

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one—in fact, it would be cruel to do otherwise. On the other hand, it would be equally cruel to have such high expectations for the mule that you try to make it act and perform like a race horse.

Therefore, specialists in work with the blind must learn accurately to assess potential without making the mistake of believing that a race horse is actually a mule, or vice-versa. Training, understanding, experience and common sense should produce the desired result. Greatest among these is the training the specialist receives which teaches what truly is to be expected from properly trained blind people.

D. Independence: In this same vein, in work with the blind virtually everyone talks of “independence.” There is a huge problem, however, with this concept since different people understand the term to mean entirely different things. When I use the term, for example, I literally mean the ability to live a wonderful, normal, competitive life. But, for others, the customer who is able only to leave the front door to get the mail will be said to be “independent.”

If we as service providers honestly and truly intend to do our very best to empower our customers, then we need to learn just what expectations are realistic, and we must strive to elevate the expectations of those customers. Further, we must first learn what real independence is for the blind, and then we must do our very best to help the customer not only strive for but also achieve real independence.

There are those who, without thinking through what they are really saying, state that blind people can’t be independent because independence means that you can do everything you want to do by yourself. They point out that, since this level of achievement is not possible for the blind, independence is not possible either. If this theory is examined, however, it is demonstrably a foolish and inaccurate statement.

Yes, it is true. I can’t drive a car myself. Does this mean that I am not independent? I think not.

In our household, I am the partner who lifts the heavy things, since my sighted wife is not as strong as I. Does this inability to lift heavy things mean that my wife is not independent? I think not.

I cannot read inkprint visually, but my wife can’t practice law. I can’t see the color of a shirt on a hanger, but my sighted wife can’t reach the bowl she wants from the top of our kitchen cupboard. Who is independent, and who isn’t?

The reality is that in our society people are interdependent with one another. No person literally does everything by and for himself or herself. Therefore, when we talk of independence for the blind, we are obviously talking about something other than the ability to do everything there is to do by yourself. We are talking about being interdependent—just as interdependent as other people are.

For a properly trained blind person, independence means having the ability

to do what you want to do, when you want to do it, and doing it without paying such a heavy price—either monetarily or otherwise—that the thing is hardly worth having once you get it.

Dr. Jernigan (1993) built upon this broad statement and defined real independence—as only his remarkable and compelling communication style could do it—when he gave the following advice to the blind community:

“Hold your head high, in the joy of accomplishment and the pride of independence—but not because of dog or cane or human arm, and not because of your ability to read Braille or use a computer. These are the trappings of independence, not the substance of it. They should be learned, and used when needed—but they should be regarded only as means, not ends. Our independence comes from within. A slave can have keen eyesight, excellent mobility, and superb reading skills—and still be a slave. We are achieving freedom and independence in the only way that really counts—in rising self-respect, growing self-confidence, and the will and the ability to make choices. Above all, independence means choices, and the power to make those choices stick.”

Of course, independence itself does not come to a blind person without its own price. The blind individual must be willing to undergo intensive, proper training to achieve it. In a school or orientation center, the student must be willing to work hard enough to take advantage of and absorb what is being

made available to him or her. In other words, the quality school or orientation center is only the vehicle which can make the information and opportunity available, but the customer must be committed enough and disciplined enough to take advantage of it.

Blind people truly can be independent and self-sufficient! Many people understand and accept this truth, but others don't. Some say something like this: “But, don't you think you could have been even more independent and self-sufficient if you had ordinary vision?”

This is another foolish road to travel as we consider just how independent blind people can be. Reality for us is that we do not compete in this world against what we as blind people might have been had we been sighted. We need to be prepared to compete not against what we might have been but against other people as both we and they now are.

If we get into the wishing game and slip away from reality, our opportunities for absurdity are endless. Why not ask me what I might have been able to do with the money of the Kennedys or the presence and persuasive ability of Ronald Reagan.

I emphasize again, we as blind people do not compete against what we might have been—sighted, richer, smarter or better educated, and the like. Just to put a neat little wrapping on this point, do you suppose anyone ever said to President Franklin Roosevelt, “Gee, Mr. President, just consider what you might have been if you had not had polio.”

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Dr. Jernigan (1993) has also observed that blind customers usually go through a three-stage process on their personal road to independence and empowerment. They are: fear and insecurity (FI), rebellious independence (RI) and normal independence (NI).

The first of these, FI, is easy for anyone to understand. When a person is newly blinded, he or she will have succumbed to the public's attitude about the helplessness, incompetence and inferiority of the blind as a group. Now that he or she has become blind, the natural assumption will be that all of this negativity instantly applies specifically to him or her.

It is this person who will be full of fear; fearful that he or she can't do anything; fearful of the future; fearful of rejection; fearful of injury; fearful that friends and family will need to provide total care; and fearful of existence itself. I have personally met many newly blinded people who not only think privately but say out loud, "I would rather be dead than to be blind!"

This individual is in urgent need of proper training. Such a person also needs to be introduced immediately to members of the organized blind movement for inspiration, encouragement and renewal of healthy and realistic hope—to close the loop on the empowerment circle.

The second phase, RI, is a bit more complex. It usually occurs when the customer is involved in training, although this stage of development can also affect people who take no training at all. These

are the blind people with chips on their shoulders; people who are not pleasant to be around.

The customers who slip into this phase are often bitter and angry. They also feel that they must constantly prove to others just how independent they have become. In reality, of course, they are really desperately trying to prove to themselves that they can be independent although they don't actually believe it at all.

People in this phase are the ones who become rude and hostile when a well-meaning sighted person offers assistance. They lose control and make scenes. More about this later.

What the quality school or orientation center should be striving for is normal independence (NI). NI occurs when the customer has truly accepted blindness, has come to feel that it is OK—it is respectable—to be blind. This occurs when, referring back to our four essential ingredients involved in proper training, the customer has "come emotionally, not just intellectually, to know that he or she truly can be independent and self-sufficient."

When you achieve NI, you will have gotten to the place where you are comfortable and secure enough with yourself—with your own inner feelings—that you don't spend much time bothering about blindness one way or another. Through proper training, you will have reduced blindness to the level of a mere nuisance or inconvenience, and you will

make blindness just one more of your normal, everyday characteristics—a characteristic with which you must deal just as you do routinely every day with how strong you are, how old you are, how educated you are, what sex you are, how smart you are, how personable you are or how much money you have.

It is coming to know this emotional peace and security which takes a lot of time and expertise in a school or orientation and adjustment center. The investment of time, however, is worth it. It is this inner peace which brings empowerment and the freedom we seek. Unless one believes that he or she is capable of independence as a blind person, independence is not truly achievable at all!

Let me make one final point about independence from a slightly different perspective. We, as professionals in work with the blind, should also be striving constantly to help our customers become independent from our own agencies. This is what I mean:

In far too many cases, customers are dependent for a lifetime on their state VR agencies. The same individuals are “Closed Rehabilitated” over and over again. This is the inevitable outcome when the customer has never received proper training. A little progress is made here, and a little there. But the entire proper training package has never been provided, and the customer keeps searching and hoping and trying.

I personally know thousands of blind people from across this country. Those

who received proper training the first time around rarely apply again to get on somebody’s caseload. They are independent, successful and happy. Perhaps the best evidence of success is demonstrated when the customer turns out personally to be independent but is also independent of the agency which provided the proper training. What I am saying here refers only to “poor” training. This point has nothing to do with providing VR services to enhance employment potential. (See RSA Policy Directive 97-04).

In my forty years of experience, what I have observed all too often is the customer who remains dependent for a lifetime on the system. Hopefully, we have arrived at that day when this outcome is unacceptable to all in the field.

E. Specialized Training Units for the Blind: There is another widespread misunderstanding in work with the blind which must be addressed. It has to do with the concept of “integration.”

Some people wrongly have the impression that full integration of the blind into society precludes the establishment and use of special schools for blind children or orientation and adjustment centers for adults. They argue that it is undesirable segregation when kids go to a school for the blind or when adults attend an adjustment center for the blind.

I reject this view! There are a myriad of reasons why people with a common interest or people who have common problems to solve join together. For example, when I wanted to become an

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attorney, it made sense that I separated myself out and attended a law school, not a medical school or a school of architecture. There was a specific, justifiable reason for me to do so, and no thinking person would suggest that I had been unfairly segregated from the broader society by attending a law school. I needed specialists—specialists who were qualified to help me achieve the goal which I had set for myself.

However, this plain logic is often abandoned when the blind are joined together either for education, rehabilitation or for concerted action. Full integration of the blind into society does not mean that we as blind people must separate ourselves from the very community from which we draw our identity. Further, services for the blind such as Braille, cane travel, adaptive technology, daily living skills and the like, are unique and very specialized. Therefore, specialists who can teach the needed skills and attitudes are an essential part of the process of empowering the blind customer.

I have already discussed in some detail the fact that the newly blinded customer will be afraid and also ashamed and embarrassed about being blind. In my own case, I had no interest as a young person in being around or even associating with other blind people. I suppose that association with others reminded me of the problem I was trying to hide. In my mind being around other blind people made my blindness seem even worse than it already was.

I now know that what really helps blind

people develop a correct and positive perspective about blindness is to associate with other blind people and to begin to realize that the concerns of all blind people are their concerns, too. I also know that what was really healthy for me was for me to come to understand that I was part of a “community,” not in an isolationist sense, not in a segregationist sense, but that I was a valued part of a specific and identifiable community.

Direct association with other blind people—properly trained blind people—also does something else. It provides inspiration and encouragement and a kind of support which is not available from any other source. The school or training center for the blind should do as much of this encouraging as it can, but an agency is not a community of blind people. This is true, even if the school or agency has blind employees. Therefore, as I pointed out in the discussion on the empowerment circle, the school or agency must also refer customers routinely to the organized blind movement.

In the chapter on Informed Choice, I quoted remarks from former Rehabilitation Services Administration Commissioner, Dr. Fredric K. Schroeder, made at an Arizona training seminar for VR professionals. In that same presentation, Dr. Schroeder told this story regarding integration and segregation: “When I was directing the special education programs for the Albuquerque, New Mexico, schools,” he said, “I was discussing the program placement of a particular student with his mother. The boy needed Braille, cane travel and attitudinal adjust-

ment. However, the boy's mother told me that she wanted her son to go to regular classes, not special education, since she did not want her son associating with other blind people."

Dr. Schroeder continued, "She said that she didn't want her son to be segregated and placed with other blind people, since she didn't want him to grow up thinking that he had to marry a blind girl."

Commissioner Schroeder told the mother, "I agree with you. I also hope your son doesn't grow up feeling he has to marry a blind woman. On the other hand, if he falls in love with a blind woman, I would hope that this would be all right with both of you and that he wouldn't feel that somehow there is some shame involved in marrying a blind woman!" This exchange between Dr. Schroeder and the mother indicates the lengths to which some people feel they must go in order to avoid the stigma of blindness. This brings us back to the beginning of the philosophical points outlined in Chapter II. Blind people are normal people, and in order for us to provide full empowerment, we must help customers come to understand that they are normal and that it is respectable to be blind. Usually, the specialized school or adult training program is the best placement setting for such essential training to take place. **SPECIALIZED TRAINING IN SUCH A SETTING IS NOT SEGREGATION!** On the contrary, it is the necessary foundation which leads to complete integration.

My own attitudes on appropriate educational placements for blind youngsters

have changed dramatically through the years. In the 1970s, when schools for the blind began to be schools for people with severe, multiple disabilities, I began to think that the public school placement would be the better choice. It was clear that the educational and training opportunities in schools for the blind would deteriorate—so much staff time was needed to help those with severe disabilities that the normal, blind student would not be able to get the assistance and support he or she needed. This, of course, is precisely what has happened.

However, the hope that the placement in the public school would be the answer to everything was just that—hope! That didn't work either. To this day, most young blind people graduate from the public schools totally unprepared for adult life. Through the use of aides and other conveniences, the students have been made to be dependent, not independent. Further, it now seems clear that the public schools cannot possibly provide the attitudinal and skill training blind people need to become successful adults. Frankly, most blind public school graduates need to attend a quality orientation and adjustment center for an extended period of time following graduation in order to learn how to be blind and to achieve full empowerment before they ever attempt vocational training or employment!

Since all of this is so, I now believe that a young blind child should first attend a good residential school for the blind in order to master the attitudes and the skills of blindness. Once this training

and adjustment have taken place, it is then desirable for the student to transfer to the public schools to complete the educational experience.

For adults, there is nothing to debate. A quality, residential orientation and adjustment center is the first step on the road to freedom and is the very heart of the entire VR process. Specialists who know and understand blindness are essential to full empowerment.

One final point needs to be made on the general topic of proper training in quality orientation and adjustment centers. Customers who do not understand what it takes to achieve empowerment and ultimate freedom may argue in the beginning that the training will take too long. Specialists with the empowerment motive must do the best they can to convince reluctant customers that they need to look at center training as a wise investment in their own futures.

If the customer can come to understand that an investment of eight or ten or even twelve months will mean that the rest of his or her life will be better for it, then the selling job on the concept of extensive training becomes much easier. "If you invest eight months now, and if this investment means that you will be fully empowered and free for the next forty years, that's a pretty desirable return, wouldn't you say?" This precise argument has worked for me countless times through the years, as I have been working to get the newly blinded individual to take a risk in quest of freedom and normality.

F. Proper Training and Educational Programs: One additional point also needs to be made concerning educational programs and the scope of their duties. Their tasks are many and complex. First, they must provide their students with the same educational experience those students would have received had they been sighted. The system often fails here. Second, they must provide their students with the same kind of proper training which is needed by all blind people—this must necessarily include each of the four ingredients. But, third, they have yet another enormous job to do. They must do what they can to teach the parents of each blind child truly to understand blindness, to create an understanding of accurate expectations and to participate in the training and motivating of their own children. The schools simply cannot do it all. Parents need to become a part of the solution, not part of the problem.

In CHAPTER VI, I discussed the fact that, for the blind customer, the best way to achieve full empowerment and freedom is to close the loop on the empowerment circle through full participation in the organized blind movement. I can do no better here than to offer that same solution to parents. The National Federation of the Blind has an outstanding division called the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children. It has local chapters, an annual national meeting and training seminar and also publishes a magazine, *Future Reflections*. It is essential that parents learn as much as they can about blindness and programs for the blind so that they can have an active involvement

in what is happening to their children. Also, they need a yardstick by which to measure the effectiveness of the programs in which their children are involved.

G. Orientation Centers as “Dumping Grounds”: One final, general observation needs to be made about residential orientation centers and which customers get sent to attend them. In my recent experience with several centers I have observed a troubling pattern: Where VR specialists do not fully understand the value and importance for the average blind person of proper training in a good orientation and adjustment center, they often tend to use such centers merely as “dumping grounds” for the customers they think of as the hard cases rather than as empowerment stations for typical blind people. These hard cases are the ones who have lots of problems and would appear to be difficult to place. This is fine as far as it goes, since such individuals certainly need all of the quality training they can get.

However, these specialists then all too frequently fail to consider and work toward orientation and adjustment training for those whom they think of as higher functioning. These customers are usually those with some residual vision. The VR specialists mistakenly assume that these blind people can get along just fine using their vision and thus are not in need of extensive adjustment training. Therefore, too many higher functioning partially blind customers miss out on the very proper training which truly can give them empowered, free lives. They go on for years and years, just “getting along”

rather than achieving to their maximum potentials.

This troublesome problem most likely occurs because some VR specialists have not yet understood that such partially blind individuals are really “blind.” At least three negatives result from this practice. First, far too many customers are denied full empowerment. Second, since the outcomes are less striking when only the lower functioning people are sent to centers, many VR specialists doubt the true value of proper adjustment training. And, third, those specialists who administer or work in the quality orientation and adjustment centers often become frustrated when they meet the blind people who are just “getting along” but who could have benefited profoundly from proper training.

With these general observations as a background, we now turn to a detailed discussion of the four ingredients which constitute the essence—the nuts and bolts—of proper training.

DEVELOPING FEELINGS OF INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

“Acceptance” of Blindness

Meeting Challenges

Sleepshades and Emotional Adjustment

Facing Routine Life Experiences

*White Canes and
Emotional Adjustment*

Frank Discussions about Blindness

Role Models

Paying Back

Emotional Adjustment Takes Time

As we turn to a detailed discussion of the four ingredients involved in proper training, a simple observation needs to be made for clarification. Even though these topics will be discussed separately in this and the next three chapters, this separation by topic and category is not what actually happens in the day-to-day setting of a school or orientation and adjustment center. Elements of each of these are constantly and simultaneously involved in every class or activity which is taking place daily.

Now, to the first of the four ingredients involved in proper training which I outlined in Section B of Chapter VII. “The blind person must come emotionally, not just intellectually, to know that he or she truly can be independent and self-sufficient.”

Obviously it’s easy to get the average customer to know this truth intellectually. Just get him or her to memorize the phrase and repeat it a few times. It must be understood, however, that this little intellectual exercise will have nothing whatever to do with the actual adjustment of the emotions! It takes real expertise and it also takes a lot of somebody’s time to help the blind customer to become a believer and to come emotionally to understand that true independence and self-sufficiency are really possible, not only for the blind in general, but specifically for him or her. The ideal situation is for the customer to experience a complete emersion into blindness and correct attitudes about it.

Just as an aside, it should be noted that

most schools and adult training programs have never come to understand that emotional adjustment is key to empowerment and freedom. They tend to believe that an introduction to or only little training in the simple skills of blindness is all that is needed for the average blind person. Of course, as previously discussed, because of their low expectations—because of their soft bigotry—they really don't believe their customers will amount to very much anyway, so why bother.

In order for school or orientation and adjustment center personnel to be enabled to deal effectively with this emotional piece of the intricate training puzzle, these specialists must first come to understand themselves that it is society's misunderstandings and misconceptions about blindness, not blindness itself, that is the real problem which must be addressed through proper training. They must also understand that their blind customers will have bought into these erroneous attitudes and that emotional adjustment is key to success. Among other things, a good training program—whether for kids or adults—literally must be an ATTITUDE FACTORY!

As we have previously discussed, most people believe that blindness means helplessness, inferiority, total dependency and incompetence. Since the broader society holds these mistaken views, the customers with whom we are working—mirroring the attitudes of the broader society—will hold these same views. Something, or someone, must intervene and direct the customer toward healthier

and more positive thinking. We as professionals in work with the blind must do what we can to create and promote this “attitude factory” environment.

A. “Acceptance” of Blindness: The very first step in helping the customer come to know emotionally that he or she truly can be independent and self-sufficient is to get that individual to admit to and accept the fact that he or she is blind. A basic truth on this point is that, no matter who you are, your problems can't get any better if you insist upon denying their existence. The school for blind youngsters or the orientation and adjustment center for adults which actively participate in perpetuating the denial can't be said to be of any use whatever. In fact, such behavior is destructive, not constructive!

Blindness specialists who are truly interested in full empowerment and freedom for their customers—those with the empowerment motive—must do the exact opposite. They must see to it that blindness is routinely discussed and that the word, “blind,” is used over and over. This word must become normal and commonplace (comfortable) for the customers of the program. Denial must be eliminated as a method for coping with blindness if true empowerment is to be the objective!

Returning for a moment to information covered in the first chapter of this book, when I use the word, “blind,” I don't just mean people who are totally blind. Included within my definition are those partially blind people who are so blind

that they can't function in a significant number of life's daily activities as sighted persons. They must learn to accept their blindness in the same way and for the same reasons which totally blind people do.

Part of acceptance is simply learning comfortably to use the word, "blind"—to use it with neither shame nor embarrassment. Also, it is learning to carry the long, white cane everywhere you go, without shame or embarrassment. It is learning Braille and the other alternative techniques of blindness and then being willing to use them as needed wherever you are, including in the presence of others, without shame or embarrassment. The only way to eliminate the negative and self-limiting feelings is to make these and other experiences routine—they must become the norm.

B. Meeting Challenges: Another part of adjusting the emotions in the quest for true empowerment is accomplished by exposing our customers to activities which at first blush appear to the customer to be difficult, if not impossible for the blind to accomplish safely—challenges designed for meaningful success. These include such things as running power tools; traveling alone with the long, white cane in both familiar and unfamiliar surroundings; water skiing; rock climbing; cooking on a grill; sewing complicated patterns; etcetera. The customer must learn that he or she can handle these or similar challenges competently with or without vision. The customer literally must be pushed beyond what he or she initially thinks is possible. Repetition

is the key, since, often, it is through repetition that the point is really driven home.

Some schools or orientation centers do what they can to see to it that these or similar experiences are made available only once or twice. This is not what I am discussing here. We are working to change emotional feelings which have been developed and reinforced over a lifetime. Therefore, it is necessary to engage in these and similar activities over and over again until the customer becomes convinced that he or she, being a normal person, can do competently what normal people do. This becomes particularly apparent when you consider the fact that, at the same time the good program is working on positive, emotional adjustment, the customer is also being bombarded daily with the usual negative and erroneous information about blindness.

While I don't have space in this book to write specifically about each and every challenging activity, I will comment briefly about learning to run power tools to make a general point which will carry over into the other activities.

The experiential and challenging training, which is provided must be of the type which shows and teaches the customer that he or she really is a competent and normal person. In teaching blind customers to run power tools, there are currently two completely diverse approaches which are taken. The first of these is destructive, the second is constructive.

First, in the name of safety and efficiency, some schools or training centers create special and artificial situations and environments for the blind that are destructive to the learning process. Safety guards not commonly found on certain machines used by people who are sighted are installed. Also, in one shop which I once visited, little iron fences had been constructed around each dangerous power tool. The customer could not get to the machine without opening and going through a special gate.

Unfortunately, this approach does not develop healthy, emotional feelings of normality and independence. It teaches the exact opposite—it merely perpetuates and emphasizes the existing, erroneous notions of helplessness and incompetence. These, of course, are the very emotional feelings which the attitude factory should be working vigorously to change.

On the other hand, the method under which I and other customers received training at the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center for the Blind—and the method used today in the quality programs around the country—was constructive. The machines which we learned to operate in the wood and metal-working shop were exactly the same as those which would be found in any good high school or college shop for sighted students. The only special devices we used were for measuring. Blind people can handle training offered in this way very safely, given the right kind of training and confidence.

For our shop projects, we could build anything we wanted, and the Commission

would pay for the materials, so long as we built two—one for the customer to take home, and the other for Commission display. This display was to assist in the public education about blindness which we were continuously providing.

Imagine the terrific feelings of pride and accomplishment—the terrific emotional boost—which resulted when a customer could put his hands on the two grandfather clocks he had just completed and say, “I did this, and I did it using the same equipment the sighted use!” These normal, healthy, emotional feelings will naturally transfer to other areas—“If I can run ordinary power tools safely and successfully, perhaps I really can work and support myself and my family, too.”

Here is one last example of how good programs may achieve positive, emotional adjustment through the meeting of challenges. The challenging activity is tied in with skill training and development. For example, when I was a student at the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center, not only was it mandatory for every student to take travel class, but it was also expected that students would perform a challenging activity as the symbol of completion of the class. A travel route referred to as “the 5.2”—a walk of five and two tenths miles—was used. This soon became a challenging event to which each student looked forward. Completing it was difficult, and the emotional boost for the students upon successful completion was enormous.

Several of the quality centers use a dinner symbolizing completion of home

economics as a similar challenge. The student who is graduating plans, shops for, cooks, sets the table and manages the clean-up activities. I am aware of dinners to which as few as four and as many as thirty are invited and entertained. Again, the feeling of accomplishment, of pride, of personal satisfaction and of ability is tremendous.

C. Sleepshades and Emotional Adjustment: If the customer is partially blind, then these challenging and other apparently difficult class and extra curricular activities are performed using blindfolds called sleepshades to achieve maximum, emotional empowerment and to reduce vision dependency. There are several reasons why this practice produces the best results for those who are partially blind.

(1) The blind person who has had usable vision will have learned to function visually and will continue to try to do it, no matter how ineffective that current level of limited vision may be. He or she will assume that this is the normal way of doing things and will be vision dependent. Therefore, the partially blind customer who is not blindfolded but is trying to use his or her poor vision during training will try constantly to use that limited vision and will not really accept and learn alternative techniques. However, competence in the alternative techniques can never be achieved in these circumstances, nor can any real emotional adjustment take place.

There is but one simple way to overcome this problem—train without using sight

at all. Practicing over and over without using vision will produce the desired level of competence as well as a real emotional feeling and understanding that the alternative techniques are efficient and reliable and that blind people truly can function, with or without vision.

(2) Since we are discussing proper, emotional attitudinal adjustment in this section, we also must understand completely that, if the residual vision is used during training, the customer will continue falsely to believe that the only reason he or she can do anything at all is because of the remaining vision which he or she has. No positive emotional adjustment occurs in such training but, in fact, perpetuating this false belief simply strengthens the level of the misunderstanding. This entire problem is eliminated instantly when sleepshades are used and positive emotional adjustment takes place. What a freeing experience it is when the customer realizes, "I can do that, and my blindness has nothing to do with it."

(3) Also, for efficiency, the partially blind customer needs to learn how to use his or her remaining vision to maximum advantage. In order to accomplish this objective, he or she must first really learn those alternative techniques and come to understand that they work. These techniques must become reflex, well-honed and comfortable. Then, when training has been completed, the customer will no longer operate with blindfolds but will use that combination of alternative and visual techniques which is best suited to handle specific tasks on a case-by-case

basis. However, the decision as to which to choose—whether to use an alternative or a visual technique—for a given task can only be made satisfactorily when the customer is competent in and comfortable using the blind technique—when the customer is no longer vision dependent. Only then can residual vision be used to best advantage. As I pointed out in Chapter II, limited sight is always valuable, if it is used properly.

On the issue of sleepshades, there are those specialists who hold an opposite opinion. They argue that training of the partially blind with sleepshades is useless since, once the blindfold has been removed, the blind customer cannot ignore vision and use alternative techniques and the remaining senses efficiently. They suggest that, since people receive eighty percent of their information through the eye—a premise which I vigorously reject, the phenomenon of “visual override” occurs when the blindfold is removed. Thus, vision will, once again, become dominant and make the use of alternative techniques and other sensory information confusing and meaningless. I totally disagree with this view although this theory could present the appearance of being true, if the training under sleepshades has not been proper but merely cursory; that is, if the purportedly trained customer actually continues to be vision dependent. However, this notion of providing training without sleepshades completely misses the point of the valuable emotional adjustment which takes place when the customer learns that he or she can function competently using no vision at all.

Secondly, it misses the point completely of the importance of helping the customer use his or her residual vision effectively, by learning when it is appropriate to use it and when it is not. I am not suggesting for one minute that residual vision should not be used. Of course it should be used; it should be used for efficiency in combination with effective and well-honed alternative techniques.

If customers are provided with a thorough explanation of the reasons for the use of the blindfolds during training, then most will accept their use and make progress accordingly. For a few, it takes several explanations before they really get it, but through persistence they will get it. Even so, some will be tempted to “cheat their teachers” by lifting their shades to take a peek. Such students will get it even more quickly if they are taught from the outset that they actually will be “cheating themselves” rather than their teachers if they decide to lift the shades to take that peek during practice. Most rational adults will easily come to understand this point.

In addition, the training done under sleepshades must be of sufficient duration—usually several months—for the customer truly to master the skills and adjust the emotions. When proper sleep-shade training is used, the argument supporting the concept of visual override goes out the window.

(4) Then there is the sorry problem of “repeaters” in training centers when the partially blind customer is experiencing gradually deteriorating vision. It is

common around the country for the same customer to attend the same orientation and adjustment center over and over again as visual changes occur.

To compound the problem, VR agencies also then close the customer as rehabilitated several times—a practice which skews federal VR statistics.

The scenario goes like this: Since he or she is not sighted, a partially blind customer comes for training, but sleepshades are not used and blindness is not really addressed. The customer learns to function visually, perhaps using magnifiers or large screen TVs. The customer leaves the program believing that the problem of blindness has been fixed, at least as well as he or she hen thinks it can be fixed.

Then, in a year or two, the customer loses more vision and is unable to function. Therefore, he or she will think that the solution is to return for more training based upon current visual levels, so another visit is made to the training center. When the vision decreases further, or when the customer is totally blind, then the customer comes back yet again and probably learns at least a part of what should have been learned in the first place.

This practice is not only a disservice to the customer, but it is also a terrible waste of public funds and of people's time—both the time of the staff and the customer. If the training is done properly the first time, then there is no need for repeaters. As I have said previously, this

criticism refers only to “poor” training. This point has nothing to do with providing VR services to enhance employment potential or for upward mobility of the under-employed. 97-04). (See RSA Policy Directive)

In addition to the waste of staff time and limited financial resources, there is another compelling reason to avoid having repeaters. If the customer who has received only a small part of needed training is fortunate enough to find employment, then consider the problems created by the need to leave work and to go back for more training because of deteriorating vision. Jobs have literally been lost because of this foolish and erroneous practice. If sleepshades are used during that initial, proper training, then this need to leave the job to take repeat training is completely eliminated.

Note: One final point must be addressed concerning sleepshades. Frequently, sighted people are blindfolded “to learn what it’s like to be blind.” For the most part, these exercises are harmful, not constructive. The person who has had no training but who tries to eat a meal under blindfolds, for example, will have a terrible time. However, he or she will have begun the project under the mistaken opinion that blindness means incompetence and inability. The experience of trying to eat under blindfold will simply reinforce this mistaken attitude.

What the sighted person will forget is that he or she has had no training and cannot expect to handle the situation with anything other than frustration. Since

this is so, blindness specialists generally should avoid this little exercise. If they feel that there is some valid reason to do it, then they should explain very carefully to the sighted participant that, since there has been no prior training, the experience will in no sense simulate blindness.

D. Facing Routine Life Experiences:

Another piece of this adjustment of the emotions is handled simply by having customers engage in everyday activities: going shopping, going to fashion shows, going to fairs, going bowling or horseback riding or to dances. In my days as Director of the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center, we all got ourselves dressed to the "nines" and went to inaugural balls, to the theatre or to similar social events.

The purpose in all of these and like activities is to help the customer come to understand and feel emotionally that he or she is a normal person who can do what normal people do. I once had a young, newly blinded father exclaim, after he had stayed up and had a good ride on water skis, "By God, if I can do this, I can get a job and support my wife and my kids!" He did just that!

E. White Canes and Emotional Adjustment:

Training in the use of the long, white cane is essential for much more than the simple task of getting around. If it is done properly, using the cane constantly can also aid enormously in the process of emotional adjustment.

The program policies for canes both for schools and adjustment centers for adults

should be the same. Long, solid canes—not folding or telescoping ones—should be used. The use of this straight cane completely eliminates the temptation of the partially blind customer to fold up and hide the cane as a part of solving the problem of blindness by trying to "pass" or to engage in "the great masquerade." By constantly broadcasting—because of the visibility of the white cane—to people around him or her, "Hey, look at me, I'm blind," the customer gradually accepts and becomes comfortable with his or her blindness.

To make this piece of the adjustment process a speedy one and to strive for complete emersion, another simple rule should be put into practice—carry the cane at all times. When this is done, it doesn't take long until the customer will begin to feel at ease and to become comfortable having been perceived as a blind person. Incidentally, it is this same constant use of the cane which helps to develop a good traveler. The body must learn to react with reflex action based upon the information received from the cane, and the more the practice, the better the traveler.

F. Frank Discussions about

Blindness: The employees of the good school for the education of blind youngsters need to figure out ways to discuss blindness to help students learn the difference between fact and fiction on the subject. These students should also be taught the school's defined philosophy about blindness. The student should learn to say the words—even though he or she won't believe them emotionally in the

beginning. Then, the students should be expected to conduct tours of the school or to make presentations to groups or clubs repeating the philosophy which has been learned. Simply repeating the words, often over and over again, will help the student internalize them emotionally.

In the adult orientation center, it is essential to hold frank group discussions about blindness several times a week. The defined philosophy should be learned and discussed, but the adult customers must also learn to examine and question specific issues relating to blindness which arise daily. The adult customers, of course, should also take tours or make public appearances as a part of the program's educational effort. At the Iowa Commission, we used to have an exhibit at the State Fair to provide public education about blindness and this, too, gave students an excellent opportunity to mouth the right words. Adult customers, too, can internalize simply by repeating the right words over and over.

So far as the length of training in an adult center is concerned, students learn and progress at different rates, so no fixed training period should be set. However, fifty years of experience proves to those of us who are interested in best practices for training the blind that it usually takes from six to nine months to adjust the emotions to a satisfactory level. Even then, it is essential for the customer to become actively involved in the organized blind movement for continuing support and reinforcement upon completion of formalized training.

G. Role Models: Along the way, but as a routine part of the program, it is also essential for our customers to get to know and mingle with well-adjusted, successful blind adults. Good role models are invaluable in the emotional adjustment process. It should be a regular practice for VR counselors and rehab teachers to refer new VR or IL customers to the local chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. Schools should also work at making a meaningful connection between their students and the organized blind movement. As a group, the most successful and inspiring blind adults will be found in any community of any size in these local chapters.

To make these referrals a reality, college and university programs offering Master's Degrees in VR counseling, rehab or independent living (IL) teaching or those preparing students to be future special education teachers of the blind should invite representatives of the organized blind movement to classes frequently. The ideal situation is for these future blindness specialists also to become actively involved in the Federation. It is one thing for these future specialists to engage in "book learning" in a laboratory-like setting. It is another thing altogether for them actually to meet and get to know competent adult blind role models. The attitudes and expectations of these future specialists will, of course, have everything to do with the emotional adjustment and personal expectations of their future customers.

Then there is the question of blind special education or rehab professionals.

Blind role models have a significant impact, either positively or negatively, upon a customer's emotional adjustment. Good blind role models serving on a staff are invaluable. Bad ones don't help at all but, in fact, are harmful.

At the residential school I attended, for example, the only blind male role model I had was the pitiful, helpless man who taught me how to weave rugs, make rubber doormats, weave baskets and cane chairs. His example and presence may well be one of the factors which contributed directly to my sitting at home for the next eight years following high school graduation.

Contrast this negative situation with what I experienced both as a student and staff member at the Iowa Commission for the Blind. Director Kenneth Jernigan established the policy when he came to Iowa that if a blind person were to be employed in a professional staff position, that individual must first have worked successfully somewhere else in competitive employment. His theory was simple: He wanted to have blind people—good role models—on the Commission staff who were in the best possible position to motivate and encourage customers not only by teaching them the Commission's defined philosophy, but also by validating it through their very presence. These blind role models were a valued part of the entire emotional adjustment process.

How? Expectations for customers were high. First, it was inspiring and motivating for center students simply to be able to know and get to work with blind people

who had actually held jobs in competitive employment. Further, students who were still struggling with their attitudes about themselves and their own blindness were often reluctant to try new and apparently difficult things. When this situation occurred, or when a student flared and challenged a staff member by saying, "I can't do that—just what did you ever do?" Jernigan wanted this experienced, blind employee to be able to respond honestly by telling the student exactly what he or she had done and just how it was done. "If I can do it—and I did, then you can do it, too."

An opposite situation is what we generally find. Throughout the blindness system, a VR agency finds some bright, young blind person and sends him or her to college. Then, if things go well, the student is steered toward a Master's Degree in VR counseling, VR teaching, or for IL teaching. A VR agency then hires this inexperienced individual to teach and counsel others. In this circumstance, this person is not really a positive role model at all, having had no real life experiences to share concerning competitive work or the other activities of normal life. Further, what happens when the reluctant student says to one of these inexperienced specialists, "I can't do that—just what did you ever do?" Sadly, there can be no plausible answer.

I have made several references either to bad or good role models. Here is what I'm talking about, starting with the bad. I personally know or have observed countless blind staff members in various programs around the country who have

not accepted and adjusted to their own blindness. In these circumstances, what possible good can they do for their customers? Some are still so maladjusted and ashamed that they refuse to carry white canes, use Braille, associate with other blind people or even to use the word, "blind." They spend their energy trying to pass themselves off as sighted people. It is not an exaggeration to state that such specialists impact negatively upon the emotional adjustment of their customers.

The good blind staff role model is one who has accepted his or her blindness completely. This person will have adjusted emotionally, mastered the alternative techniques and openly used them, learned to cope easily and unemotionally with what other people do or say because of their poor attitudes about blindness and learned to blend in and be acceptable to those around him or her. Then, if this individual also has had and can discuss personal experiences in competitive employment and full participation in life, so much the better. In the emotional adjustment process, there is no substitute for a blind employee having had real life experiences in the real world of work.

H. Paying Back: A final part of coming emotionally to know that you're okay has to do with the concept of "giving back by doing for others." In the beginning, of course, the customer can't do much of this since "a poor man doesn't have much to give." But, as the customer begins to grow and develop, an important part of his or her own emotional adjustment is getting outside of himself or herself and serving as a positive role

model and helping other blind people. The customer can progress significantly by experiencing that joy and personal satisfaction which flow from real service and generosity to others.

The fact is that, historically, the blind as a class have been a people for whom things have been done; a people to whom things have been done; and a people to whom things have been given because of other people's generosity, kindness and, yes, pity. Those who fall into the trap of social conditioning and come to accept society's inferiority view of themselves, also eventually come to expect that things will be given to them because of their blindness. It is a rare thing for this type of blind person to believe that he or she is worthy of an equal place in society and can or should give to others.

Yet every civilization, every culture, every world religion or world philosophy recognizes the simple truth that a human being is not a "whole person" without embracing in some fashion the concept of giving and "giving back." It is an emotionally healthy and maturing thing to do. Therefore, the quality school or orientation and adjustment center should do everything it can to instill the notions and habits of generosity and giving in its customers.

So far as blindness training is concerned, when the customer begins to get involved in giving, he or she can get away from internalization, self-pity and self-absorption and also can begin to enjoy the satisfaction and personal rewards which flow from generosity and giving.

For the blind customer, the natural place to become involved in giving is the organized blind movement, itself. There are two reasons why this is so.

First, he or she will experience the emotional satisfaction and growth which flow to any human being from generosity and giving. But, second, by giving back, at least in some measure, as an active part of the organized blind movement, the customer will be assured of having the ongoing support of well-adjusted blind people which is required to keep moving forward and growing in self-confidence and self-esteem.

On this second point, a reality of life for the blind must always be kept in mind. Daily, the newly trained blind person will continue to be bombarded with negative and mistaken information about blindness. This will be happening at a time when new and constructive attitudes taught to the customer have not completely been internalized, and this incorrect information will be contrary to what has been learned through proper training. In these circumstances, some customers are bound to backslide. It is virtually impossible to slip back, however, when the customer has the constant support and encouragement of positive, well-adjusted blind role models and colleagues.

Also, as I pointed out in the “empowerment circle” section, it is not enough for the customer merely to meet and observe successful blind people who are a part of the organized blind movement. What has been proven to make the real difference is for the customer to involve and immerse

himself or herself in the Federation and its activities. Only then will the customer become fully empowered, and it has been shown that success with life in general is much more achievable and certain when this happens.

I. Emotional Adjustment Takes Time: The bottom line of all of these elements of this “first ingredient” is to help get the customer to the point where optimism is a basic mind-set for life: where he or she can honestly say, or, more accurately, honestly feel emotionally, “I’m blind, so what! It’s ok! I can compete on terms of absolute equality and have a normal, successful and gratifying life—good vision isn’t what makes for success or happiness! Blind or sighted, I really can be independent and self-sufficient, and I can have a great life! IT IS RESPECTABLE TO BE BLIND!”

All of this is true, but I want to finish this chapter with one final, yet significant, point on emotional adjustment and empowerment. Several times in these pages I have alluded to the fact that emotional adjustment does not come easily, and that it takes a lot of somebody’s time and expertise to achieve it. As I have done before, let me use my personal experience to demonstrate the point as clearly and strongly as I can.

I graduated from the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center at twenty-six years of age in August of 1961 as a true convert and believer. I was free—I knew what it felt like to be free! I immediately entered Drake University in Des Moines with gusto and took very heavy class

loads both winter and summer to try to catch up in some small measure for the many years I had lost.

In the fall of 1962, I transferred to Loyola University of Chicago and worked even harder for a full year so that I could enter law school in the fall of 1963. During all of this undergraduate schooling, I was in control of my life. I had no doubts. I had truly adjusted. The philosophy worked!

Then, in the fall of 1963, law school work commenced. At our first meeting, my advisor said, “I don’t know how you’re going to do this. We have never had a blind student here before. I know you want equal treatment, so we’re letting you have it. We’re not giving you any special help or consideration.”

“Fine,” I said. “That is exactly how I want it to be.” I was confident and firm on the topic.

My advisor then said, “You should know, though, that we here at Loyola are in the process of improving our school and the caliber of its graduates. Therefore, beginning with your class, we’re going to make this school so much more difficult than it has ever been, that I’m not certain how anyone will get through it, blind or sighted!”

Although these comments were what one might refer to as chilling, I said, “I’m sure this won’t be an insurmountable problem. I have come a long way, and I intend to work hard and get through.”

Even though I did work hard, in about eight weeks my confidence waned drastically. I became convinced that I would flunk out at our fall “pass/fail” exams, and I also determined that this “Federation Philosophy” upon which I had banked my future was not true. I had done more than a little back-sliding and had fallen into the trap of social conditioning. I let myself settle into gloom and despair for several days and convinced myself that a blind person could not cope with this enormous workload. The temptation for me was to drop out as some of my sighted colleagues had already done. (Interestingly, at this time there was no state affiliate of the NFB in Illinois, and my only contact with successful and well-adjusted blind people was through an occasional phone call back to Iowa.)

Then one fine morning my eyes were opened with a startling revelation. In the coffee room just before classes began for that day, I learned that many of my classmates were experiencing precisely the same feelings as I. They were convinced they would flunk out, too, for a variety of specious reasons.

One older woman said, “I’ve been out of school too long to handle this.” A male friend said, “I didn’t read enough as a kid. You have to be a great reader to make it here.” Another said, “I took my undergraduate work at the wrong institution. They didn’t prepare me well enough for this.” And yet another said, “No one told me that we would have to do for each week of classes what we had an entire semester to do in undergraduate school.” And there were other similar excuses.

My eye-opening revelation was that we were all blaming something other than ourselves to justify our pending failure. We each had what we perceived to be a plausible excuse. No one, including me, had the guts to be honest and to say, "I believe that I'm going to fail and it's because I'm not intelligent and competent enough to be enrolled here."

For me, finding the perfect excuse had been easy. What better scapegoat could one have than to pin pending failure and doom on blindness. Once I realized that I was simply using my blindness as a justifiable excuse to cover for possible personal shortcomings and failures, I dug in my mental heels and worked even harder than ever and, unlike many of my fellows, I did survive. Our day school class (there was also a night school) began with one hundred and twenty-six students. Three years later, thirty-six of us walked proudly across the stage on graduation day. My advisor had been correct. Loyola University School of Law had indeed been tough.

The point here is not to pat myself on the back for possessing dogged persistence but to demonstrate through personal experience that real and permanent emotional adjustment to blindness takes time. Just consider—two years after leaving the Iowa center—and with a lot of personal successes under my belt—I still slid back into that trap of social conditioning and blamed my blindness when the going got tough. It is little wonder, then, that customers who are limited to very brief stays in training programs rarely if ever achieve real emotional adjustment and

full empowerment. In my own case, this backsliding experience a full two years following my center graduation taught me a lot, and I have never faltered again. I am living proof that **THE PHILOSOPHY DOES WORK!**

If we as service providers understand that emotional adjustment to blindness takes lots of time and effort, we will eliminate the practice of sending customers for training of two weeks or four weeks or twelve weeks or sixteen weeks. We should do our very best to get it right the first time and to strive for full empowerment and avoid repeaters. Deep and lasting emotional adjustment is key to full empowerment and a sense of freedom.

MASTERING THE SKILLS

Braille Reading and Writing

The Long, White Cane

Keyboard and Computer Skills

*Homemaking and
Personal Grooming Skills*

Additional Skills

*“Life-Coping Skills” and
the Ubiquitous “How”?*

The second ingredient involved in proper training which I outlined in Section B of Chapter VII is not particularly sophisticated or mysterious. Even so, certain aspects of the issue need some detailed discussion and elaboration: “The blind person must really learn and become competent in those skills—the alternative techniques of blindness—which will make it possible for him or her truly to be independent and self-sufficient.”

Let me begin this chapter with a stark reality. Skill training without emotional adjustment is meaningless! In fact, it may be even worse than meaningless since customers who don’t know any better will mistakenly accept the notion that the skill training they have had will solve all of their problems. Before long, however, they will be wondering, “Is this all there is?”

As I have said previously, every blind person needs competence in the alternative techniques of blindness in order to have a truly empowered, independent and self-sufficient life. Putting this another way, it is absurd to talk of freedom, independence and self-sufficiency if the person doesn’t have these skills. Therefore, the quality school or agency will do the very best that it can to see to it that these techniques are not only introduced or taught, but actually mastered by each customer.

Also, each customer needs to learn to develop a series of what we might call “life-coping skills” which will round out the picture of true independence and self-sufficiency.

Even though not much discussion is needed in this chapter on the topic of basic skill training, I should point out that there are two broad, troublesome aspects involved which deserve comment. First, far too many in the field of work with the blind harbor the mistaken belief that the learning of the skills is all that is involved in proper training. This, of course, is incorrect. Then, second, and equally damning, far too many educators and rehabilitators err in the opposite direction—they mistakenly believe that many of the alternative techniques used by the blind are too difficult for lots of blind people to learn, so they don't bother to teach them at all.

Neither of these views is correct. In this book, I am encouraging and promoting full empowerment—not merely the appearance of empowerment! Therefore, since it doesn't pay to talk about being independent and self-sufficient if the person isn't, I advocate that Braille, long-cane travel, typing and computers, homemaking, personal grooming skills, and so forth, be taught vigorously and taught well by educational or VR programs.

A. Braille Reading and Writing: Since all of Chapter XII is being devoted to a thorough discussion of Braille, my comments in this section will be brief. Suffice it to say that Braille reading and writing should be taught to every blind student in every school in America, assuming other disabilities do not preclude such instruction. Braille is the equalizer—it is the basic literacy tool for every blind person. And the blind child

who needs Braille should not be made to deny his or her blindness as a method for coping.

Absurd as it is, there are those in the field of work with the blind who say that they believe that Braille is both too bulky and out of date. They suggest that recorders, computers, the internet, email, telephones and the like have eliminated the need for Braille. I am moved to wonder if these same people would contend that, since all of the wonderful tools and devices I have just listed are also readily available to sighted children, we should quit teaching sighted children to read and write using pencil and paper. I think not. In fact, I know that such a fallacious argument would never be put forward when considering the needs of sighted children—of those who are perceived to be “normal” and competent: children with futures.

Through my forty years of experience in this field, I have personally observed many Braille readers, some great, others good and far too many not so good. The best overall observation I can make on this issue is that the blind adults I know who can read Braille as fast as sighted people read print all began using Braille as small children! Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that learning in the early years of life is easiest and best.

Therefore, Braille should always be taught to blind youngsters—those who are partially blind as well as those who are totally blind, and it should be started at the earliest possible age. In fact, as we enter the new millennium, there are

those who suggest that the ability to read and write Braille and truly to be literate should be looked upon as a new “civil right.” While I don’t necessarily agree that, technically, Braille is a new civil right, I do agree that at least, morally, it is just that.

The one exception to the rule that Braille should be taught to every blind student is where the partially blind child can read regular sized print at a competitive rate for sustained periods without tiring or developing headaches, and where the cause of blindness clearly does not suggest later deterioration of vision. However, for the partially blind who do not meet this test, Braille must be taught. Print should also be taught when this is determined by the IEP team to be both possible and beneficial.

Young children must be taught Braille reading using their fingers! Why do I emphasize this obvious point? Because, in September of 2000, not last century, I was informed by some parents (the story was confirmed by a school administrator) that their eight-year-old partially blind son attending a school for the blind in America is being taught Braille using his eyes, not his fingers. This is not only damaging to the youngster—it is unforgivable!

While this book is not intended to provide instruction in how to teach Braille reading and writing (other authors can do that), I do know some basic things for certain. There are two components involved in the process of learning to read and write Braille. First, there is the simple

task of memorizing the code—presumably this could be done using eyesight. Secondly, however, it involves a different process altogether to develop instant comprehension when a group of letters is felt with the fingers and to transmit the message from the fingertips to the brain. This is the more difficult part of the Braille reading learning process. Why on earth would any thinking person have a young, blind child go through both of these processes separately?

Adult centers should also teach Braille to all adult students. It is then up to the customer to decide how far he or she would like to go in developing real skill. Perhaps the older person will wish to master it all, while others may decide only to be able to take down simple notes, phone numbers and the like. If so, this is great. I can’t tell you how many older blind people I know who were never taught Braille and, therefore, have no way of writing down so much as a phone number. Not only is this embarrassing to these folks, it is also downright inefficient to be illiterate.

B. The Long, White Cane: Extensive training in the use and mastery of the long, white cane is one of the most important services the good school or training center can ever provide. The ability to go where you want to go, when you want to go there with ease, grace and comfort is key to real independence and freedom. In addition merely to enjoying grace and comfort, however, specialists in work with the blind must come to recognize that there is also a direct correlation for customers between good

travel skills and success in school or high quality employment.

Further, “proper” training in the use of the long, white cane is one of those classes which serves a multiple purpose. First, of course, the cane is the simple tool which is used to get around safely and efficiently. But, hand in hand with the simple skill training, extensive practice and success in “traveling” alone is one of the greatest emotional adjustment and confidence building techniques in the entire adjustment to blindness process. As I pointed out in Chapter VIII, when you have proven to yourself over and over that you can get around safely without sight, you gradually come to understand emotionally that there are a whole lot of things which you can do well without sight.

In order to become truly skilled and competent, however, the customer must use the cane correctly and constantly. Ultimately the customer must arrive at that point where all the information which is needed for safe travel is available through the cane and the senses. Use of the cane literally must become a reflex action. What seems difficult in the beginning soon becomes routine and second nature.

There is only one way to achieve this level of confidence and comfort—practice, practice and then practice some more. Therefore, in addition to regular travel training classes, the quality school or training center will establish the policy that canes are to be carried and used at all times. The cane which is used during training must be the long, solid cane. If it

is not, the customer struggling with overcoming denial will be tempted constantly to hide the collapsible cane to avoid being identified as blind.

As a result of having received this type of training from the Iowa Commission for the Blind, I soon learned to go where I wanted to go when I wanted to go there, and I did it with comfort and ease. It was not long until I found myself walking down the street doing what sighted people do—thinking about training, about family, about girls, about politics, about the latest crisis at the center or just thinking about what a nice day it was.

One additional point should be made here. At opposite extremes, there are two very different and contradictory views as to how cane travel should be taught. The first, in which the instructor usually works one-on-one with the customer, teaches what is referred to as the “point-to-point” method—“You are here now, and this is precisely how you get to there.” To be candid about it, I have never met what could honestly be called an independent traveler who was trained using this protective and custodial method.

The other method teaches by what some have come to call the “structured discovery” method. The customer has extensive solo practice using a cane and soon learns to go anywhere he or she wants to go without individualized instruction. When I was a student, for example, four or five or six of us had travel class at the same time. We would gather in the travel teacher’s office (he was the only one the Center had for its twenty to twenty-five students) at the

beginning of travel class—usually two hours each day—and the teacher would then give each of us a different assignment to complete. “Mary, you go here. Charlie, you go there. Jim, I’ve got a doozie for you, today. You go there.” This, of course, was what happened after the simple basics of travel had been mastered.

The travel teacher then spent most of his time with the customer who was the newer student in need of special attention. The rest of us would go out on separate routes for practice. The teacher might, or might not, see any of us during that class period. When he sent us to some difficult spot for the experience of it, he might try—if something were not more pressing—to come and observe how we handled the troublesome assignment.

To illustrate the real life outcomes of these diverse teaching methods, let’s use me as an example. I left Des Moines and moved to Chicago one year after my orientation center training had been completed. If I had been taught how to travel with the white cane by the point-to-point method, I would have been completely lost and helpless when I arrived in Chicago. It would have been necessary for me to hunt up an O and M instructor to teach me how to get around—subways, elevated trains and the like. I would have been forced to repeat this duplicative training when I moved on to Washington, D.C., New York City, Baltimore, Anchorage and Tucson.

As it was, I had been taught by the discovery method. Once I had developed the skill and confidence to travel alone in Des

Moines, I was equipped to travel alone anywhere. In fact, I did just that. Frankly, it never even crossed my mind—when I moved to Chicago and on to the other cities where I have lived—that I should seek out someone to teach me how to get around in those new places. Because of the type of training which I had received, I didn’t even know that there was an opposite view or that some would believe I should limit myself by thinking that I couldn’t travel using my long cane in unfamiliar areas without a specialist to teach me.

To complete this discussion of white canes, it should be observed that there are four significant reasons for a blind person to use one of the long, white canes. They are:

(1) The long, white cane is simply the inexpensive, common-sense tool used by the blind to get around safely and efficiently. There is no great mystery or science about it. Extensive, solo practice and self-confidence are the keys to the successful use of this simple but effective tool.

(2) Constant use of the cane, wherever you go, also helps to speed the entire adjustment to blindness process. This is why the long, straight cane must be used during training. It is not possible to try to “pass” and pretend that you’re not blind if you are holding this big, white, neon sign, which tells the world “I am a blind person.” Although this understandably is difficult for some in the beginning, this constant use of the cane dramatically speeds the emotional adjustment process. You know you’re making real progress when you

can go out into the public using your cane without shame or embarrassment.

Just as an amusing aside, however, I might point out that not all people know what white canes are. When I moved to New York City in the fall of 1967, training for the blind had been scarce in that area and few properly trained blind people were seen in public. I was riding up in an elevator in a Manhattan office building one day when a fellow passenger asked, "Do you always carry your fishing pole with you?"

As gently as I could—I knew he would be embarrassed—I told him what the cane was. He was embarrassed and apologized profusely, but he got past it and we had a friendly chat about new and revolutionary training techniques for the blind. Even so, he found it difficult to believe that I was a federal attorney out alone on a federal investigation.

Like everything else in the adjustment process, the simple ability to be seen in public using that long cane also takes time. In my own case, I had been a student in the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center for an entire month before I went home for a weekend. I had been using my cane all day every day in Des Moines and had experienced no discomfort in the presence of others; however, when I got home and went to church with my mother, I lost the struggle with myself and left the cane behind. As I say, the emotional adjustment takes a lot of somebody's time. Just think of what an idiotic thing that was for me to do. Everyone in town already knew I was blind, so why hide the cane?

(3) The cane serves as an "identifier" to those around the blind person. Uncomfortable as it is in the beginning, the customer soon learns that he or she can get along much better and feel much more free when others are aware of his or her blindness. Without this identifier, many awkward and strange things can happen.

For example, it is quite common for partially blind people who don't use canes to be thought of as being snobbish or aloof. A friend who doesn't know you're blind waves or smiles and nods a silent greeting, and you don't see him. He then wonders what's wrong with you and probably makes comments about you to others.

Or, how about this? Before I began using a cane, I was trying one day to catch a bus in Des Moines. When a bus was approaching, I asked a person standing near me, "Would you mind telling me which bus this is?"

When he answered, "What's the matter? Are you blind or something," we were both in trouble and mighty uncomfortable. All of this and much more can be eliminated in a single stroke when the customer confidently uses a white cane as an identifier. What a feeling of freedom and security it brings!

(4) Finally, the long, white cane serves today as a "symbol of independence" for the blind. In former times, when the short, crookhandled cane was used not as a travel tool but as an identifier, there was a sense of helplessness and dependence—the stigma of blindness—surrounding its

use. Today, when properly trained blind men and women step out confidently and efficiently using the long, straight cane, the attitude surrounding it has shifted. To the blind community of today, this long cane is the symbol of a glorious newfound independence and freedom. In fact, for many, the NFB cane literally has become a declaration of independence.

C. Keyboard and Computer

Skills: Until quite recently, it was essential for the blind simply to be able to type. Some needed this skill for school or employment, or if nothing else, typing was useful for writing notes or letters to sighted friends or family members. Today, with the proliferation in the field of computers, it is imperative for nearly everyone to master computer skills. We have moved beyond the mere necessity to be able to communicate in some way with the sighted. Today, a great percentage of jobs and professions demand excellent skills in the computer area.

Therefore, it is a must for all schools or orientation and adjustment centers to prepare their customers as well as they can with both basic communication and computer skills. As I have said so frequently, it is not enough merely to "introduce" the customers to the various kinds of technology. The latest technology and adaptive devices must be mastered.

D. Homemaking and Personal

Grooming Skills: These skills, too, are essential for the blind person who intends to live a normal, independent life. The quality school or orientation and adjustment center should be sure that these skills

are really learned. The customer needs to know how to keep a house, how to cook and plan meals using something other than a microwave, how to shop, how to pick out and maintain clothing, how to do laundry and a hundred other similar simple tasks of life.

This should be so ordinary and routine that you may be wondering why I am troubling to discuss it at all. Well, let me tell you of a training situation which I observed at a rehabilitation center, not thirty years ago, but in February, 2000. I had been asked to evaluate a particular center and to make recommendations for improvements in its services. As a part of my evaluation, I sat in and observed classes.

In the home economics class, I was chagrined to observe the following: The class consisted of three people—one blind student, one teacher and one sighted intern from a university Master's program. I had encountered the student in other settings, and she was in every way a normal, healthy adult. The teacher placed the student at a counter. The teacher then read the recipe, and the intern fetched everything needed to complete the project. The student's task was simply to pour the ingredients into a bowl and mix—a bowl which also had been fetched from the cupboard not by the student but by the intern.

THIS EXERCISE DID NOT TEACH THIS STUDENT HOW TO COOK or even to believe that she could! It taught the exact opposite. It taught this hapless student that she could not cook or even manage to find what was needed for the

project. In this specific incident, another disastrous lesson was taught. The sighted intern—the future teacher of the blind—was also taught that blind people really can't cook. I shudder to think what kind of future teacher this person will be.

It is nothing short of disgraceful, perhaps even criminal, that such a lesson could occur in the year 2000. The evidence is all around us that properly trained blind people go about the routine and normal business of life every day. This includes cooking and cleaning and matching clothes and the like. Yet some purported training programs continue to practice their soft bigotry through their low expectations.

Finally, the quality school or adjustment center should also work with customers on grooming and the other simple customs of civility which distinguish human beings from animals. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter XI, the blind need to be sure to know how to “blend in” and be acceptable to the broader society.

E. Additional Skills: The customer ultimately needs to learn much more than the simply alternative techniques which we have discussed. Merely learning travel, Braille, computers, cooking and grooming—those basic, specific skills which are common to all and essential to any blind person's independence and success—isn't enough. The customer needs to master what some call “problem solving.” The quality training program will teach the student how to figure out other methods and techniques which will become necessary throughout the routine activities of ordinary,

nary, daily life whenever new situations arise. In other words, the customer needs to learn to extrapolate.

When the customer moves on to enter college or work or the other ordinary pursuits of life, situations will arise constantly which could not have been foreseen while he or she was a student in a school or orientation and adjustment center. Therefore, there is no possible way even the best of programs can teach the customer each and every alternative technique which will be needed for a lifetime of success. The customer must, of necessity, learn how to figure out new and effective techniques as new and different situations arise.

Just how do you teach a student to extrapolate and to draw upon past experiences to handle new and different circumstances? As I write these pages, I can't offer a specific prescription for teaching a customer to “think.” What I do know is that the quality school or orientation center will concentrate so heavily upon discussions about alternative techniques and upon the development of healthy self-confidence that the issue takes care of itself. The program which has high expectations and provides proper training generally can point to this result as one of the real benefits of full empowerment.

Here is a simple but practical example of what I'm talking about. When I began college following my Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center training, my travel skills were invaluable and I took copious Braille notes with the slate and stylus. I soon developed sufficient speed to write

every note I wanted. But, before long, I learned that professors frequently wrote on blackboards or flipcharts presenting outlines, diagrams, charts and other similar pieces of specific information which we were expected to copy accurately and then memorize or study thoroughly.

What to do? No one at the Iowa Commission for the Blind had taught me a technique to handle this new situation. Without much thought, I figured it out. The classes were full enough that I was always sitting near or next to a fellow student. I first thought of asking someone to re-copy his or her notes for me after class. But then, I had a better—a more efficient—idea. “What would happen,” I thought, “if I were to carry a supply of both carbon and plain paper in my briefcase. Then, when the need arose, I could ask a fellow student simply to take my carbon paper and make me a copy as he or she wrote. Would they do it?” Yes, they would, and they did, for all of my five years of undergraduate and law school.

Here is another example which is even more significant, since it literally had something to do with my first job. That first employment following law school graduation was working in Washington, D.C., for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). However, it was not the kind of job I really wanted. It was a writing and research job at the NLRB’s headquarters, and there was no direct work with courtrooms or the public. After all of my hard work, I wanted to be a real attorney in a real courtroom.

Following this year in Washington, I

set about getting myself transferred to New York City to do the kind of work in which I was interested. First, I was given a temporary assignment as a Field Attorney in New York, “to prove whether this job could be done by a blind person, since none had ever done it before.” What a way to go.

One of the duties of the Field Attorney was to serve as an NLRB Hearing officer—as an agency judge. “How could you run a hearing,” I was asked by my prospective new boss?

As I sat in and observed a few hearings to get my feet wet and to become acquainted with the process, I noticed that, in addition to swearing in witnesses, listening to arguments and ruling on motions, the Hearing Officer had to read and review a lot of print documents to determine their admissibility. “And just how am I going to do that,” I wondered? This was in 1967, and there were no laws requiring that “reasonable accommodations” be made by employers.

Then I noticed something else. Virtually every time a document was submitted for approval, the Hearing Officer called a brief recess in the hearing to give him time for his review of the document. During this break, the court reporters sat idly by and waited.

I approached several of them while hearings were on break and asked, “If I were running this hearing, how would you feel about acting as my reader for the review of documents?” (I should note that I had another alternative. I could either find a volunteer reader or hire one out of my

pocket but such a reader might have had to sit sometimes for hours on end without doing anything.)

To a person, they said that they would be pleased to help by acting as my reader, and they did. It was my problem solving and coming up with this simple little technique that ultimately caused the NLRB General Counsel to say, "Look, I have no idea what blind people can do or how you do it. It is obvious, though, that you do know. If you want the permanent assignment in New York City, it's yours."

F. "Life-Coping Skills" and the Ubiquitous, "HOW"? Historically, countless blind people have not been in control of their own lives and thus have not been hired for high quality jobs for which they were eminently qualified. They could not satisfactorily answer the simple question, "How?" As it is with specialists in the field of work with the blind and blind customers, members of the general public, including employers, also need to undergo major attitudinal adjustments about blindness.

"How will you get to work?" "How will you find our bathroom?" "How will you be able to get through the cafeteria line?" "How will your employment here affect our insurance rates?" "How will you be able to get the special equipment you will need?" "How can you get to work if it snows?" "How can you take notes at staff meetings?" "How could I possibly fire you if you can't handle the job?"

These and a dozen similar questions are what a potential employer really

wants to know long before the question, "How can a blind person perform the job I have?" ever occurs to him or her. Although today's employers are a little more sophisticated than they were in 1966 when I was refused employment by the Securities and Exchange Commission, the doubts remain. The blind applicant who is on his or her toes—the person who is in control of his or her own life—will keep this in mind and be prepared to slip some needed information into the interview as a small part of demonstrating an ability in the area of life-coping skills.

The other half of the equation has to do not with the public in general or with employers but with the blind individual himself or herself. "How do I find and hire readers?" "If I need them, how do I train and supervise them?" "If need be, how do I fire one and, for that matter, where do I find one?" "How do I negotiate with my employer about needed accommodations?" "How do I bargain with my VR agency about equipment I need for school or for my job?" "If I were to need some brailling or taping to be done for my job, where could I find the needed service?"

Again, these and a hundred other "how" questions must be answered to satisfaction by the blind customer seeking ultimate empowerment and freedom. One does not acquire this information in travel class or Braille class or computer class or grooming class. The good school or orientation and adjustment center will do what it can to help the customer learn how to handle these and numerous other coping skills needed for a full and successful life, but

the learning process for these kinds of issues must take place in other surroundings, too.

There is one other primary venue where much of this development of the ability to devise and master life-coping skills should occur—the college or university campus. Blind students attending such institutions should learn much more than pure academics. They should be gaining invaluable experience in handling these and similar situations. A few do, but far too many don't.

I have already discussed the problems for the blind which have arisen out of the misinterpretations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and college and university Disabled Students Offices. These issues arise generally from the “reasonable accommodation” requirements in the law. Because of these misinterpretations, the ADA has, for many, become a devilish wolf in sheep's clothing. The problems are legion. In my opinion, there has been a disastrous misinterpretation of the ADA's purposes, and many colleges and universities have fallen into a trap and are now doing what the student should be doing for himself or herself.

To be very clear about this last statement, however, the blame for this problem of interpretation does not rest with the colleges and universities alone. Disabled students, themselves—including many blind students—have also been involved in this growing misinterpretation of intent and purpose. Then, too, this misinterpretation of the concepts of reasonable accommoda-

tion has been a boon to VR programs, and many of them have done what they could to encourage the colleges and universities in providing services—books, readers and the like—which the VR agencies, themselves, should be providing. This mixup obviously saves these VR agencies money which they should be spending to empower their customers.

The schools locate and hire readers. The schools train and supervise them. The schools fire them, and the schools negotiate with professors to arrange for test taking. The schools bargain with VR agencies about equipment blind students need if it is not being provided by the school. The schools arrange for needed brailling or taping to be done, and arrange for sighted guides to lead students around if they have not had proper travel training, and the schools provide sighted note takers for the blind students who are illiterate. The sorry saga goes on and on. These and similar actions are what one might call “unreasonable” accommodations.

Since the college or university campus should be a place for the student to mature, to learn and master life-coping skills and to take control over his or her own life along with academics, the blind student should be developing methods for handling these and similar simple obstacles for himself or herself. The college campus, with its pressures, deadlines and presumed personal responsibilities, offers an ideal setting for this much-needed, practical skill development. The campus setting should be analogous to an on-the-job training opportunity.

Instead, in the name of civil rights (sup-

posed required accommodations under the ADA), there has been what some call “over-accommodation,” and far too many students are not learning the practical things they need to know. Even more, they have been lured into the trap of dependency and custodialism. Many begin to believe that they are actually owed all of these unnecessary and harmful considerations as a matter of “right.” However, custodialism—even when it is cloaked in the guise of civil rights—is still custodialism.

Civil rights—no matter for whom they are intended—together with their accompanying protections—have always been intended to broaden opportunities and horizons for the members of the particular protected class. No one ever intended that, in the name of civil rights, opportunities for success should actually be diminished, but this is precisely what is happening when custodialism replaces the chance for meaningful growth and development.

Nothing comes free in this life, and the cost to students who succumb to the temptation to accept over-accommodation is enormous—it is not worth the price. In reality, the question for any blind student should not be, “What can I get?” The more pressing question is, “What can I become?”

I totally reject the notion that unneeded accommodation is a matter of civil rights. As I have said before, in this book we are dealing with true empowerment and freedom, not merely the appearance of freedom. Blind people need to learn and master basic life-coping skills to enable

them to take control of their own lives. They either need to know HOW, or they need to be equipped with how to figure out the HOW. Quality service providers should help to motivate students in this direction and to keep them focused upon the goals of personal responsibility and empowerment. Otherwise, they may as well continue to be students for life since they will never be capable of meeting the rigorous challenges of competitive, high quality employment.

Accepting over-accommodation and custodialism is shortsighted. One way to approach our customers’ acceptance of too much accommodation is by working with them to help them see the importance and value in taking the long view. We can point out that taking the short view—the unneeded and undesirable help from a university in the name of civil rights—is analogous to burning one’s own house down on a cold night in order to find warmth. It might seem like a pretty good idea at the time one is feeling the cold but, later, there will be no place to live. Similarly, the college student who takes the short view and accepts the custodial treatment will still have to learn meaningful life-coping skills later somewhere else in order to be successful—to be employable.

For many blind students who honestly do desire to be independent and self-reliant, the new systems and bureaucracies themselves that have arisen from these ADA misinterpretations may also cause new and troublesome challenges. I recently had a phone call from a current college student who told me that, on his campus, he is not permitted to go directly to speak

with instructors to work out details for test-taking, needed books, and so forth. The rigid system at his school requires that he first secure a slip verifying that he is disabled from his disabled students' office. He must then present this slip to the instructor in order to gain entree.

Even if he gets the slip, some instructors still refuse to deal with him about certain issues. They have been programmed to believe that they must deal through the disabled students' office. Apparently, in their minds, they would be violating some form of natural law if they were to deal directly with a mere blind student.

Knowing in advance what the answer would be, I asked my young friend, "If you were a sighted student in this same school, what hoops would you have to jump through in order to meet with an instructor to work out some simple detail or other?" "None," he replied.

What on earth is the innocent, blind student just seeking empowerment and an honest chance for freedom and a normal and productive life to do?

When the ADA was first presented to the Congress in the 1980s, the NFB was not particularly enchanted with the prospect. Federation leaders knew that one of the dangerous outcomes for the blind—it has already come to pass—would be the tendency on the part of the general public, as well as lawmakers and service providers, to lump all people with disabilities together into a single mold and to presume that every solution to every problem for every disabled person would

be the same.

This notion of meeting individual needs by treating everybody alike is, of course, nonsense. The only thing the blind have in common with other people with disabilities is the word, "disabled." The problems of the blind are unique to blindness, and the solutions to those problems are also unique.

At the time the NFB decided to support passage of the ADA, it did so only upon the inclusion of a Federation-sponsored provision which specifies that an individual disabled person may not be forced to accept some unwanted accommodation. Obviously, a lawsuit or two may be required in order to re-emphasize this point and to remove yet another ridiculous stumbling-block from the long road to freedom and independence for the blind.

In the next chapter, we will examine another kind of coping. It, too, is essential to full empowerment and freedom.

“COPING” WITH BLINDNESS

*Routine Putdowns
Beyond the Bounds
Discrimination*

The emotional adjustment and skill training components of proper training covered in the last two chapters are critical factors in achieving empowerment and freedom, but they aren't enough. The third ingredient deals with a completely different issue. This topic, set forth in Section B of Chapter VII, deals not with life-coping skills but with another kind of coping, and it is a bit more subtle and complex: “The blind person must learn to cope on a daily basis with the public attitudes about blindness—with those things which will be said or done to him or her because of other people's misunderstandings and misconceptions.”

There are several kinds and levels of putdowns and denials of opportunity which must be recognized and discussed by specialists with their customers concerning this issue. Sometimes, the reason for the putdown is simply a courteous effort to be helpful. At other times, it is an effort to be complimentary. Still others go far beyond the bounds of helpfulness or friendliness. These various situations call for different kinds of action and/or reaction on the part of the blind customer.

A. Routine Putdowns: I have already discussed the fact that, because of a lack of accurate information (misunderstandings and misconceptions), most people—particularly strangers—view the blind as being helpless, incompetent and lacking in even the most fundamental of human skills and abilities. For this reason, the blind should expect to be treated regularly in one of two ways. First, we are often treated as though we are helpless children. Second, and because of the same

misunderstandings and misconceptions, the blind person who functions normally and exhibits competence and confidence is often perceived as being marvelous and wonderful—he or she is thought of as possessing great courage and as having done something which is exceptional and beyond the perimeters of what an average blind person is supposed to be able to do. As a part of the process of empowerment, service providers should do everything they can to prepare customers to cope calmly and comfortably in this area.

For those readers who are new to blindness and the field of work with the blind, here are a few examples of what I mean: As I have done several times in the past, I'll use personal experiences to describe the situation. Other active blind people can tell countless like stories about things which routinely happen to them.

Quite often, my wife and I sit down in a nice restaurant for lunch or dinner, and the waiter or waitress asks my sighted wife, not me, “What would he like?”

What, if anything, should I as a blind person do to deal with this situation? I can become rude and angry. I can make a scene. I can try to have a long philosophical and educational discussion about the competence of the blind in general and me in particular. I can simply let my wife respond for me, or I can gently and politely cope with the situation in some other courteous fashion.

I might interject here that the type of incidents which I am discussing in this section on coping are generally those

where something happens quickly, and there isn't sufficient time to engage in lengthy, persuasive conversations. When we as blind people are dealing with relationships which will be ongoing and where there is sufficient time to do it, however, then it is always important to try gently to educate the offending party about blindness. This is true whether the customer is dealing with friends, family, fellow students, co-workers or the like.

Now, back to the scenario of routine putdowns. Perhaps I have gone to this same restaurant alone and ordered a nice steak for dinner. When my dinner comes, I am surprised to find that my steak has already been cut up in the kitchen. What do I do now? Incidentally, I'll come back to the pre-cut steak for further discussion in another context.

When I leave the restaurant alone and come to a stop at the curb of the first major street which I need to cross, a husky fellow grabs me by the arm (without asking), begins to pull vigorously and says, “Come on buddy. I'll get you across the street.” Do I fight, shake my arm free, plant my heels and balk like a mule, scream for help, simply capitulate or what?

By and by, I move on for an appointment with my doctor—I am having a physical. Her nurse says to me in the examining room, “Do you need me to help you take your clothes off?”

That evening, my wife and I go shopping at a mall. She becomes annoyed with the number of people who simply

stare unashamedly, and she tells me about it. Or, as parents with small children approach from the other direction and see that they are about to meet a blind person, she tells me that the parents drag the children out of the way. They then stare and point as well. What should I do?

The next day, I go on a plane trip and a couple of interesting things happen. First, after I board, the female flight attendant says, "Shall I buckle your seatbelt for you?"

Later, when snacks are served, the attendant says in a voice loud enough for those nearby to hear, "I wanted to help, so I peeled back the wrapper on your cookie like a banana. That way, you won't have any trouble getting at it."

When I hire a sky cap to carry my luggage and to locate an available cab, I pull out money to tip him. He says, "Oh, no! I'm sorry sir. I couldn't take money from you."

These, and hundreds of things like them, are what an active blind person needs to be prepared to handle comfortably almost daily. If the blind adult doesn't understand that this is simply the way that it is in the real world, then he or she is heading for a lot of emotional upset and distress.

These examples give you a snapshot of the "blind people are as helpless as a baby" problem. Now, let's examine the opposite extreme: "That's marvelous! I can't believe you are able to do that."

My wife and I have friends over for dinner, and we're cooking out. I put charcoal in the grill, soak it with lighter fluid and light it. A guest, wishing to be complimentary, says, "You know, you are just amazing."

On another occasion, I make a speech about the blind and the new and enlightened attitudes about blindness at a service club luncheon. I believe I've done a great job dispelling the myths and selling attendees on the normality of the blind. After lunch (this was in my youthful smoking days), I strike a match and light a cigarette. An observer exclaims, "That's just amazing. I didn't know blind people could smoke." I can only assume that my ability to strike a match and touch it to the tip of the cigarette without burning myself was the perceived superhuman feat.

These, then, are the kinds of routine putdowns which the well-adjusted blind individual will experience regularly and with which he or she must learn to cope calmly in order to arrive at normal independence and freedom. The blind individual must learn to handle such occurrences without becoming emotionally upset—in fact, he or she should not get the emotions involved at all. For the person who does not achieve this level of adjustment, life as a blind person will be long and frustrating, indeed.

What can a good service provider do to prepare the blind customer to cope with these kinds of putdowns? Here is where a lot of talk and a real understanding of the problems of blindness come into play. I have already pointed out that the school in

“COPING” WITH BLINDNESS

which a blind youngster is being educated should have detailed discussions with that student about blindness and the negative social attitudes which exist. Adult orientation and adjustment centers should have even more in depth discussions with their students.

In both cases, students must come to have a real awareness and understanding of the misunderstandings and misconceptions which exist. They must explore these myths and misconceptions in depth. They must come to know exactly what it is that people think, and they must understand what particular attitude or misconception has driven the undesirable statement or action.

At the beginning of Chapter VIII, I pointed out the obvious—that even though I am writing separate chapters on each of the four parts of proper training, each ingredient is not dealt with separately during the training and learning process. This statement applies particularly to the notion of learning to cope on a daily basis with the things people do or say to the blind. The level of the emotional adjustment and even the skill training have a great deal to do with the point at which the customer learns to handle simple put-downs.

Only when customers have come to have a fundamental, emotional adjustment to their blindness and accurate knowledge about the public attitudes concerning the blind can real progress be made in learning to handle situations like those which I have described without emotional upset and anger. The students must also

understand that they have a job to do. They need to learn how to dispel myths and misconceptions whenever and wherever they can.

The objective in learning to handle simple and routine put-downs is three-fold:

- (1) The blind person must get to the point where he or she can be at emotional peace by handling these situations easily and comfortably and without frustration;
- (2) The blind person must come to appreciate the importance of creating a positive attitude about blindness in the person or persons involved in the incident as a part of an ongoing public education effort; and
- (3) the blind person must come to understand and be concerned about the reality that his or her bad behavior—rude or hostile responses—will simply magnify and reinforce the negative stereotypes about the blind, both in the mind of the offending party and also in the minds of others who may be around to observe the incident. A rude or hostile reaction to these ordinary putdowns will not merely harm himself or herself alone. The person giving the help or offering the compliment already does so in the belief that the blind are incompetent. Then, if there is a rude or hostile response, the offender will not only continue to believe that the blind as a class are helpless, but he or she will also now think that the blind as a class are rude and ill-tempered as well. This negative instruction will then have the possibility of hurting other blind people

who may later come into contact with the offender.

In Section D of Chapter VII, I talked about the various stages blind people go through on their road to independence and freedom. In the beginning, there is FI (fear and insecurity). Then, most people move at least briefly to RI (rebellious independence). The ultimate objective is NI (normal independence).

It is the people who are still stuck at the rebellious independence stage who lose their cool and react with rudeness or hostility, or even worse, when well-meaning citizens give unwanted help or offer compliments which are really not complimentary. They are often bitter about their blindness and wear large chips on their shoulders. They generally are not pleasant to be around.

They feel the desperate need to prove to others just how independent and self-sufficient they are. In reality, of course, they are actually trying to convince themselves—not others—that they can be independent and competent.

For the most part, the blind person who has achieved normal independence will just smile and say, “Thank you” or respond in some other courteous and polite fashion when some unneeded help is given or when an uncomplimentary compliment is handed out. These individuals will be aware that no real harm was intended and that what was said or done is the simple and innocent result of myth and misinformation about blindness. Such individuals will also do

what they can to provide positive, public education whenever they can.

Here is an example of the kind of discussion which it is important to have with students. When I moved to Alaska to direct its residential orientation and adjustment center for the blind, I soon found that the staff members needed as much attitudinal training and adjustment as my students. Although I knew that it might present problems, I decided to teach philosophy to both groups at the same time—I didn’t have enough hours in the day to do otherwise.

During one of the early classes, I was discussing the importance of a blind person’s coming to understand the public attitudes about blindness so that he or she can learn to cope calmly with the routine put-downs. I pointed out that the blind person has to understand what things mean before he or she can know how to deal with specific incidents. That very day, someone had said something to this effect to me, “You know, you do things so well, I almost forgot you’re blind.”

I asked the students one at a time whether or not each thought this statement was a compliment. To a person, they did.

I next asked them a variety of questions about what the various parts of the statement meant, and some of the students began to wonder if they had answered correctly in the beginning. Ultimately I pointed out that, while the person making the comment obviously had intended the statement to be a compliment, it wasn’t complimentary at all.

At that point, a sighted staff member, Ms. X., blew up. "Why are you always trying to make these students hate sighted people," she screamed. "What that person said to you was complimentary."

Now I had a true dilemma on my hands. It wouldn't do for a staff member and the new director to be in public disagreement about a major, philosophical issue, and it wouldn't do for the new Director to be bested by a staff member either. I simply told Ms. X. that the statement had not been a compliment and that the students had to learn what kind of attitudinal issues they were dealing with in order to be empowered to cope with them politely and graciously. Then, I moved on to another topic.

During the next forty-five minutes—as we discussed other issues—I considered how I might save the situation and also teach the students to understand about coping with put-downs. Toward the end of the class, a fun but instructive answer came to me—try a simple analogy.

As the class ended, I asked everyone to wait a minute. Then I said, "Ms. X., I've been meaning to say something to you for a couple of weeks now, and this seems like just the right time to do it. I simply want to tell you that you are doing such a great job as a teacher here that I almost forgot you are a woman."

The students got the point and howled with glee. Ms. X. was outraged. She said, "That's different from what those people said to you! What you said to me was not a compliment at all."

Of course, she was incorrect. The purported compliment I gave her was precisely the same as that which had been given to me. However, the point had been made with the students, and I ended the class by emphasizing the fact that whether we are blind or black or female or a member of some other protected minority, we can't handle situations rationally and unemotionally if we don't understand what has happened to us. When we do understand, and when we have adjusted enough and gained enough self-confidence, then we can generally smile, say "Thank you," and move on with peace and dignity.

Let me return for a minute to the steak, which had been cut up for me in the kitchen of the restaurant. We as service providers have an obligation to help our customers become as independent and self-sufficient as possible. We also need to teach them the importance of conducting themselves in such a way that they do not use their blindness and help to create the very negative attitudes concerning blindness about which they would later complain.

I pointed out in Chapter II, that "you can't have your cake and eat it, too." However, some blind people try. If, for example, there is something to be loaded in a car, and if it is raining, it is common for the sighted driver to say, "I'll get that. You just wait here."

It is also common for the blind person to say, "All right," and stay dry. The problem is that the sighted driver will believe that because of blindness the blind person

couldn't handle the task. On the other hand, the blind person will know that blindness had nothing to do with the situation and that he or she could have done it, but it was more convenient and pleasant to stay dry—a little laziness may also have been a factor.

Situations like this occur frequently. Without thinking about the ramifications of their actions, some blind people actually contribute to the very misunderstandings and misconceptions which plague the blind and about which they would later complain.

What does all of this have to do with cutting steak? When I ordered the steak which had come to me in bite-size pieces, I was in a city with a sheltered workshop for the blind, and the shop was quite near the restaurant where I was eating. When I good naturedly asked my waiter about the reason for the cutting in the kitchen, he said, "The blind people who come here from the shop ask to have theirs cut up like that, so I just assumed you couldn't cut yours either."

It is fortunate that I didn't feel the need to strike out in anger and hostility at the waiter or other restaurant personnel for their poor attitudes about blindness. They were innocent of fault or wrongdoing. Clearly, the restaurant and its personnel had learned their erroneous attitudes from the other blind customers who frequented the place. These blind shop workers hadn't been taught that the negative attitudes about blindness which they created could eventually cause a problem for some other blind person.

B. Beyond the Bounds: I believe firmly that we as blind people should learn to cope peacefully and unemotionally with what I have referred to above as routine put-downs. What should we do, however, when the act of the offender is not merely an effort at kindness or intended to bestow a compliment but is rude in the extreme, or even abusive.

There is no rule of etiquette or good breeding, which requires a blind person to submit himself or herself to ridicule or abuse, no matter how important it is to avoid being rude and hostile. In a word, enough is enough!

I have previously pointed out that some blind people become rude and abrasive while they are going through the stage of rebellious independence on their road to normal independence. A truth of life, however, is that blind people do not have a monopoly on rudeness or bad manners. Some sighted people share the same malady.

Consider this real-life story. When I was directing the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center, we had a philosophy class—it was called "Business Class"—the last hour of each day to discuss blindness thoroughly. On the day in question, we had been talking for several sessions about the mistaken public attitudes about blindness and our need to stay cool and calm and to cope. One student was late coming to class and when he arrived, he was fuming. He told the class and me that he had been out on travel class and had had an ugly incident.

He had been approaching an intersection when his cane apparently struck the ankle of a woman standing with her back to him (she did not see him) while she was waiting for the light to change. She whirled around and yelled, “You blankity-blank blind people have no business being out on the streets. Why don’t you stay at home where you belong?”

The student’s question for me (asked in front of all of the other students) was direct and fair. His question went something like this: “I know you have been teaching us that we need to learn to keep a check on our emotions, and I know that we shouldn’t create scenes which reinforce negative attitudes about the blind in the minds of others, but I want to know what obligation I or other blind people have to just smile and say ‘thank you,’ when something like this happens?”

“None,” I replied. It seems clear that when the put-down is routine, it is better to stay calm and restrain ourselves from creating scenes. However, it would be ludicrous for me or any other teacher of the blind to suggest that abusive situations should be tolerated calmly. This would be too high a price to pay for our supposed peace and freedom from creating a negative impression which might harm others.

I told my angry student that I hoped he had not hauled off and whacked the woman with his white cane. The obvious risk to him might be that an observer who had not heard the woman utter her abusive language might rush to the defense of

an apparently helpless woman being beaten senseless by a crazy blind man. On the other hand, a verbal tongue-lashing seemed to be quite in order.

The quality school or orientation and adjustment center must help customers understand the difference between this type of incident and those which should be ignored and tolerated. As I have frequently pointed out, specialists working for service providers must understand these issues thoroughly before sound information and good advice can be passed on to customers.

C. Discrimination: The blind, being a minority group in every sense of the word, frequently encounter blatant discrimination solely because of blindness. This is a second form of human behavior in which a different kind of coping is required. This is also another area in which specialists in work with the blind must have a good grasp of the issues and pass them on to their customers.

To summarize the problem, blind people are rejected for employment for which they are well qualified. Blind people are refused the right to rent apartments because the landlord is afraid that the blind will fall on the stairs or burn the building down. Blind people have been refused the right to rent safe deposit boxes at banks because the banks are afraid that the blind will mix up their papers and then blame the banks. The blind have been refused the right to donate blood at blood banks, to volunteer in child care centers, to purchase insurance, to ride on trains or buses, to enter health clubs

or to take guide dogs into restaurants, and the like.

If something like this happens to a blind individual, it still behooves him or her to remain calm and keep the emotions out of it—this may be easier said than done—but such discriminatory action should be challenged or stopped. It should be stopped both because of what it can mean to the individual who has been discriminated against and also to make certain that the offender or offenders do not treat other blind people in the same way.

Another point must be made clearly and firmly. Take employment. When I discuss discrimination in this area, I am referring to situations where the blind applicant is well-trained, competent and qualified to do the job, and the same concept is relevant to other of the issues I have listed. If there is some reason that the blind individual truly is not qualified, then we as service providers or as members of the National Federation of the Blind have no business coming to the rescue, simply because the person happens to be blind. This will harm the person we are helping, and it can also harm other blind people. If the unqualified individual is pushed into some situation, then the qualified individual who comes along later won't stand a chance for fair treatment.

The subject of discrimination is one in which there is confusion. Many people yell discrimination when they are faced with what I referred to in Section A as routine put-downs. Whatever else you may call such treatment, it is not discrimination.

Many people believe that it is discriminatory simply to treat people differently, but this is not the entire story. To constitute discrimination, an act must have two elements—first, it must be “unreasonable” and, second, it must also be “detrimental” to the individual to whom something has been done.

Let's look briefly at each factor. First, it is certainly detrimental for a criminal to be locked up, but it is reasonable and, therefore, not discriminatory. Some might say that it is detrimental for a twenty-year-old to be prohibited from running for the Presidency of the United States, but it is reasonable—experience is required. Therefore, it is not discriminatory. It might be perceived as detrimental to deny a driver's license to an individual with limited vision, but it is reasonable since good sight is required to drive safely.

On the other hand, it would certainly be unreasonable to hire a blind piano tuner rather than a sighted one, based on the belief that the blind tuner will automatically and necessarily be better. However, since this act would not be detrimental to the blind tuner involved, discrimination could not legitimately be claimed.

Schools dealing with blind youngsters or adjustment centers for blind adults should help their customers understand what discrimination really is and what it isn't. They should also help their customers come to understand that to fight discrimination alone is a difficult business. It is far better and easier to work along with the knowledge and support

of others—the National Federation of the Blind. Customers should be encouraged to contact the Federation whenever problems of discrimination arise.

If the customer learns to cope with and handle each of these three kinds of problems effectively, then he or she will have gone a long way toward empowerment and freedom. In the next chapter, we'll complete the discussion of what it takes to provide the full gamut of proper training.

BLENDING IN

*The Problem
A Different Approach
Jernigan Knew
Reliability
Common Courtesy
Appearance, and What
Things Look Like
The Blind are Judged
by One Another*

Finally, we come to the fourth part of proper training. Actually, I've been aware of this issue for a long time and have known that school programs and orientation and adjustment centers should be addressing it specifically, but it was only recently that it occurred to me that blindness specialists should openly discuss and address it as one of the essential ingredients integrally involved in the subject of proper training.

It is described in Section B of Chapter VII:

“Even when the blind individual has adjusted emotionally to blindness, even when the alternative techniques have been mastered and even when he or she has learned to cope effectively with the demeaning things other people do or say, the blind person must also learn to ‘blend in’ and to be acceptable to others. He or she must be punctual, reliable, neat and appropriate in appearance and possessed of good social and table manners, and the like. Since the average blind person needs to learn to blend in and to be acceptable to society for maximum success, the schools and agencies must do the very best that they can to make sure that this desired result is achieved.”

Whether we are educators or rehabilitators, our primary business is helping the blind prepare for eventual adulthood, including complete integration into the broader society and employment—successful, high quality employment. The fact is, that no matter how well-adjusted and well-trained the blind adult may be,

service providers also have to do what reasonably can be done to be sure that he or she is the kind of prospective employee a good employer will be eager to hire.

Before getting into a full discussion of the concept of blending in, however, I must offer a caveat on the subject. Yes, we as blind adults must learn to blend in to the broader society, but this in no way is to suggest that blending in should lead to an avoidance of the blind. The fact remains that the best way to close the loop on the empowerment circle is through involvement and active participation in the organized blind movement. In other words, blending in does not mean that we as blind adults should abandon the identity we receive from being a part of the blind community.

A. The Problem: Why raise the issue of blending in in a discussion of proper training? Because I have observed far too much of the following: Blind kids in schools are not expected to perform on par with sighted kids. They are often passed on from grade to grade whether or not they can read or write or spell or even think. They are permitted to come in late or to leave early. They are given more time than their sighted peers to complete the same amount of work. They are permitted to dress poorly or to practice poor hygiene. It almost seems as if the attitude of some schools and teachers is, "Since poor little Johnny is blind, he won't ever be able to do much of anything, anyway, so why bother with his personal discipline, his lack of a work ethic or his appearance."

You would think that adult orientation and adjustment centers would do better, and some do, but far too many across the country really don't. Many of these can best be described as happy homes for the blind, rather than places where proper training can be had. They have the same low expectations and low performance standards as many of the schools I just talked about. These are places where the blind can receive training, but not proper training.

I know of centers where the student may or may not show up on any given day, but nobody cares. Students are continually late for class, but nothing is done."Just come in late, and leave early," seems to be the norm. Students are permitted to look like bums and are dirty and poorly groomed, but nothing happens. There is no discipline, no structure, no expectation and no notion that the student will ever go out and put in a hard day's work in someone's place of business.

And I have observed another truly troubling problem in both schools and adult centers—students are actually taught dependence as a part of the program! One must understand that these students are people who have generally already been taken care of and taught dependence by family members and others around them—"Just sit here, I'll get it." "You can't do that, you'll hurt yourself," etcetera.

Take the school where kids are waited upon hand and foot by special education teachers or aides. For example, if a student and an aide are working together and

something is needed from a student's locker, the aide will all too frequently say, "You just wait here. I'll get it for you." Apparently, it has neither occurred to, nor has the aide been taught, that sending the blind student to the locker himself or herself should be done routinely as just one more simple lesson in independence for the day. On the other hand, getting the item for the student actually teaches dependence.

Or, consider this example. In supposed adult centers, I have seen students assigned specific seats for meals. When mealtime comes, the student simply takes a seat—probably having been led there by somebody—and then a sighted staff member brings the student his or her food. Again, without thought, such a center is teaching dependence, not independence.

These are only two specific examples of a gigantic problem used here to illustrate what I mean. A student, whether in a school or adult center, must learn to pull his or her own weight as a part of the process of achieving true independence. It is downright criminal for the educational or training program literally to foster dependence rather than to teach independence!

B. A Different Approach: Let me contrast all of this with the training I received and the circumstances in which I found myself in Kenneth Jernigan's Orientation Center. First, it was residential and full-time. Our day began at 6:00 AM with men's gym class. If we accidentally overslept, we were unceremoniously rousted.

Following a shave, shower and breakfast in a cafeteria where we selected our own food and carried our own trays to a vacant seat which we found, we began our other classes at 8:00 promptly. If we were late, the issue was addressed. Regular classes ended at 5:30, but for those who wished to do so, extra night classes were available from 6:30 until around 9:00 (our dinner would have been eaten in a downtown, public restaurant).

I took advantage of all of these optional night classes. Then, two other students and I (we were playing catch-up for too many wasted years of our lives) practiced Braille together until around midnight. At 6:00 the next morning, we began again. And promptness was the rule for all classes.

In addition, there was a dress code; cleanliness and good grooming were required; the courteous treatment of others was a must; and evening and weekend activities were scheduled. I soon learned that whatever happened during a given twenty-four-hour period was to be looked upon as a class.

C. Jernigan Knew: Clearly, even though we never discussed it, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan understood well that a fourth ingredient was a part of the proper training equation. His purpose was to provide us with all of the tools—that proper training which is essential to independence and real success. He wanted to make sure that in addition to adjusting to our blindness, learning the skills which we would need to get along, and having the kind of appearance and work ethic which would

make it possible truly to succeed either in school or on the job, we would also have self-discipline. Putting this quite simply, he wanted to do everything possible to make certain that we would be the kind of quality employees a good employer would want to hire.

It goes without saying that I created the same type of atmosphere in the centers I directed. I firmly believe that if we as blind people want truly to be independent, self-sufficient and successful either in employment or in other of life's important activities, then we must discipline ourselves to be reliable, socially acceptable and competent. We must develop a personal pride and be able to blend in!

D. Reliability: The issues of reliability and promptness don't need much detailed discussion here. These are simply learned habits which will stand blind customers in good stead in whatever activities and goals they pursue as adults. Since these are merely learned habits, the quality service provider must help routinely to teach them. Consistency is the key.

The point in my raising the issue in this chapter is that good educational programs for kids or proper training programs for blind adults—specialists with the empowerment motive—must be mindful of teaching good, not bad, habits in this area. I raise it to make certain that it does not slip through the cracks. This is the kind of factor which should be handled easily simply by making dedicated and committed blindness specialists aware of it. I have previously said that an outstanding orientation and adjustment center

must be an attitude factory. It should also be in the nature of a boot camp which employs tough love.

E. Common Courtesy: This is another area of blending in which does not need much discussion in this book. As with reliability, it should suffice simply to comment briefly upon it as a reminder to specialists with the empowerment motive. I offer a couple of simple examples to show you what I mean.

Customers, particularly those who are born blind or attend schools for the blind, sometimes must be reminded to face and look at the person with whom they are conversing. In my experience, customers who go blind later in life do this as a matter of normal human intercourse. I have personally observed some blind people, however, who were never given this simple advice and instruction, and they talk to others facing away from the person to whom they are speaking. This, of course, is rude in the extreme and does not make for a feeling on the part of the sighted individual that meaningful communication is occurring. Usually, one simple class conversation on this subject should do the trick. If it doesn't, then constant reminders may be required until good habits are established.

Another area of courtesy which I have regularly discussed has to do with shaking hands when meeting or being introduced to others. The problem usually comes up when the blind individual—male or female—is being introduced to a woman. Our culture has generally taught that men shake hands with men when they are

introduced. However, with women, the rule has been a little different. When a man is being introduced to a woman, the man does not shake hands with her unless she first offers her hand.

Therefore, what does a blind man do when being introduced to a woman since he won't see it if she offers her hand? I specifically had discussions and classes with my students on this question. We came to the conclusion that a blind man should always offer his hand to a woman when being introduced. It would be embarrassing for both the man and the woman if she offers her hand and he does not see it. On the other hand, my students and I decided that the woman would not be embarrassed or frustrated if he were to violate the rules a little and offer his hand first. She will simply take it, shake hands and complete the courteous introduction.

There are many such examples I could give. However, these two should make the point and stimulate some interesting and healthy class discussions.

F. Appearance, and What Things Look Like: The issue of appearance must be discussed in a little more detail. **APPEARANCE—APPROPRIATE TO THE OCCASION—IS IMPORTANT!** It is not just what a thing is, but how it looks, sounds and feels which gives the value. While a person is not a thing, this concept is pretty much on target as we discuss the acceptance and full participation (the complete integration) of blind people into adult society.

Blindness specialists must do what they can to drive home the point that as the customer moves toward adulthood and competitive employment, he or she will have only one chance to make a "first impression." For success, that impression needs to be good.

In fact, not only personal appearance, but also what things look like must be examined, particularly for young blind children or for adults who were born blind but who have never received proper training. In his article, "The Barrier of the Visible Difference," Dr. Jernigan (1998) addresses this topic.

He discusses the fact that blind people are not less competent than others of their age and circumstance, and that blind persons are not slow learners, or inept. He points out, however, that sometimes, something which can be seen at a glance by a sighted person must be "learned" in a different way by a blind person. The "learning" can be just as quick and just as effective, but it won't happen unless somebody thinks to explain it—to help either the blind child or the longtime-blinded adult who has never received proper training.

The fact is that the blind child (or longtime-blinded adult) must either be unusually persistent or have somebody at hand who thinks to explain and to give needed information. Otherwise, very small things which begin as insignificant details will multiply into major deficits and issues. That somebody should be the blindness specialist with the empowerment motive.

More than anything else—at least unless one is aware of it and thinks about it—meaningless visible differences can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Specialists in work with the blind must be aware that sometimes these visible differences can even lead to misplaced feelings of superiority or inadequacy.

In this same connection, blind customers who have never seen well need to be taught and learn about the acceptable customs, traditions and practices of society. How should you dress in specific situations? When you're asked to raise your right hand to be sworn in, exactly what do you do—do you raise your hand in the same way you do when you're trying to get attention in a class or meeting? Exactly what do you do when you "pledge" to the flag? Which way do you move your head in order to indicate yes or no?

If you're a man, when should you remove your hat, and when may you keep it on, and what does it mean to "tip your hat"? When should you stand during events and ceremonies? These and similar simple routines should be taught to those who cannot visually observe them. This list, of course, is not exhaustive. It should trigger additional thought and discussion.

Let me briefly address one last point on the topic of blending in through appearance: BLINDISMS! Again, this problem specifically deals mainly with young blind children or with adults who were born blind but who have never experienced proper training. Rocking, twisting the

head or rubbing the eyes and the like are bad habits which can detract markedly from a proper and desirable appearance.

Many theories have been put forward through the years in an effort to identify the cause behind this unacceptable behavior. I believe that most of it, at least, is pretty simple. All young children—blind or sighted—engage in a variety of unacceptable physical activities. If little Johnny is sighted, most parents or teachers will simply say, "No, you may not do that," and they will continue to remind him until the bad habit is forgotten.

But if little Johnny is blind, then far too many are afraid to keep at it until the bad habit is broken—after all, "I can't be mean to a blind child, can I?"

I believe that this entire problem can usually be corrected when it is addressed early and consistently. I can also speak from experience and tell you that these bad habits are difficult to break if they have not been corrected before that young person enters an adult center for training.

I have had some blind people try to convince me that appearance makes no difference, but this, of course, is plain nonsense. We live in a world which is structured for the sighted since sighted people make up the vast majority, and they always will. Therefore, if a blind person intends to get along and compete on terms of equality, he or she must learn how the sighted feel and what they think is acceptable, beautiful or attractive. This, of course, has nothing to do with the pretense of being sighted, with competence or with

innate loveliness or quality. It is simply a critical factor to consider in achieving acceptance, integration and success.

From one point of view, of course, the people who claim appearance makes no difference are correct. For it is true that the substance of a person is more important than appearance, but often we as fallible humans don't take the time to explore the substance unless the initial appearance is attractive, appealing or, at least, acceptable.

National Federation of the Blind President, Marc Maurer, recently put it succinctly and best in pointing out the importance of a good appearance when he suggested in an article (1998) that we as blind people must have talent, but we must also have the appearance of talent.

Just as an aside, I want to let you know that the best textbook I've ever read on the topics of appearance and what things look like is *Gray Pancakes and Gold Horses*. It is the fourteenth in the NFB's series of Kernel Books.

G. The Blind are Judged by One Another: This fourth ingredient also includes a special admonition which must be made with the customers we serve. It involves an appreciation by the blind citizen or job seeker that whether we like it or not, we as members of a visible minority are judged not only as individuals but also as a part of the minority group. This is one of the side effects, one of the nuisances or inconveniences, deriving from being a member of a visible

minority. This problem is compounded by the fact that people judging members of minorities and their abilities, behavior and appearance tend to associate their notions of the very poorest attributes they have witnessed to everyone in the entire group.

To illustrate, a sighted man can go to an employer for an interview and show up half an hour late. He can be dressed badly, act stupidly, conduct himself rudely and, incidentally, fail to get the job. However, since he is not a member of a visible minority, his bad impression will impact only upon him. The employer won't judge anyone else by his bad conduct and appearance.

But, let a blind person show up and perform just as badly, and his performance will not only result in a failure to become employed, but it will also hurt the chances of other blind applicants to be considered seriously since that employer will tend to judge future blind applicants by the one who presented such a bad impression of that minority group. This will be true no matter how qualified the blind applicant happens to be.

On this issue, too, I have had blind people say that this makes no difference and that it shouldn't involve them. They say, "I have enough trouble being responsible for myself, so I don't want to be held responsible for anyone else's success!"

Unfortunately, these unenlightened souls don't have the luxury of considering their personal wants in this area. This is simply the way that it is in the real

world when one is a member of a visible minority. Since this is so, specialists in work with the blind should teach their customers to take advantage of the situation and go out of their way to present a positive impression about blindness.

In fact, this entire area is one in which blind customers who come to understand the issue of minority group stigmas can learn to make lemonade from lemons. The fact is that members of the general public will usually stare at the blind—particularly those who are the most independent and self-sufficient. Since well-trained blind customers will be aware that this is true, then they will also understand that they might as well give people a positive role model and image at which to stare: They must dress a little more neatly and appropriately, act a little more courteously and politely and be a little more punctual. They must take the opportunity to show those around them that the blind are normal people who are capable of blending in. It is a simple thing to teach the sighted public that the blind—either as individuals or as a group—are simply normal people who are capable of complete integration.

In these last four chapters, then, are the details about emotional adjustment to blindness, mastering the skills, learning to cope with other people's mistaken attitudes about blindness and blending in. These are the factors which nearly forty years of experience have taught me are absolutely essential to the proper training that can predict vocational success and a satisfying and gratifying life—that training which will enable the average

blind person to become truly independent, self-sufficient and free. I urge those of you who are or will be specialists in the education of blind youngsters to insist upon this kind of training in your schools.

For those of you who are or will be VR specialists, I urge you to help your customers understand that programs which offer proper training are the ones which should be selected as they exercise their informed choice. Before you can give this valuable assistance, however, you need to understand completely the concept of proper training yourselves, and you must understand the importance of each of these four ingredients as they relate to true vocational success, empowerment and freedom.

I began in Chapter VII by saying: "Given PROPER training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business and can do it as well as his or her sighted neighbor." This statement is the absolute truth, and the techniques for providing proper training have been tried, tested and proven over and over again! These are the services which result in empowerment and real freedom for rank-and-file blind people.

BRAILLE— THE GREAT EQUALIZER

My Personal Experiences

The Illiteracy Crisis

*From Bad Philosophy
to Bad Policy*

The Problem

Solutions to the Problem

In Chapter IX, “Mastering the Skills,” I wrote briefly on the subject of literacy and Braille. I pointed out then that this entire chapter would be devoted to a more exhaustive review of the subject. Braille truly is the great equalizer for empowered, free blind people, and it is time that specialists in work with the blind take a fresh look at where we have been, where we are now and where we should be going in the future on this critical topic.

At the outset, I wish to be very clear about the issue. So far as I know, everyone involved in the education of blind children would agree without question that Braille should be taught to the totally blind. The problem revolves around the issue of the partially blind—those youngsters who generally can function to one degree or another using visual techniques. Put another way, unlike the totally blind, partially blind children can try to cope with their blindness through “denial.” Far too much denying is done.

Some damning statistics have caused me to do serious reflecting and soul searching upon what can only be called a “crisis!” This crisis has to do with the staggering illiteracy rate among our Nation’s blind children and young adults.

A. My Personal Experiences: Before turning to a discussion of the illiteracy crisis and my thoughts concerning the reason or reasons for it, let me offer a word or two about Braille and my experiences with it.

In far too many circles over the past few

BRAILLE—THE GREAT EQUALIZER

years, I have heard some—not all—blindness specialists say, “Braille is too hard to learn. Braille is too slow. Braille is too bulky. Braille is out-dated and is no longer necessary. Braille is not cool,” and on, and on and on.

Here are two of my personal experiences concerning Braille. First, as I have said previously, I grew up in a small farming town in Iowa. By the time I was fifteen, I was so blind that I could no longer even pretend to function successfully in the public school, so I was enrolled in the Iowa School for the Blind to complete my last three-and-one-half years of high school.

Unbelievable as it seems, although I could read no more than fifteen or twenty words a minute of very “large print” materials for no more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a sitting and, further, even though everyone knew I would be totally blind from RP one day, I was not taught Braille. Instead, I was taught rug and basket weaving, chair caning and doormat making. The attitude of the school toward literacy was, “Let him be normal (sighted) as long as he can.”

My parents knew, of course, that I would become totally blind, so they were justifiably concerned about my lack of training. However, when my mother wrote to the school requesting that I be taught Braille, she was told, “He can always learn Braille when he REALLY NEEDS IT.”

Therefore, since I was unable to read my own school books and papers, I got

through high school by having “literate” students (using either Braille or print) read aloud to me. By the time I graduated from the school for the blind, I was nearly totally blind and could read neither print nor Braille. I was completely illiterate.

My second personal experience with Braille involves the learning of the Braille code itself when I was twenty-six years old. After having sat at home for eight years in idleness following high school graduation, I entered the Iowa Orientation and Adjustment Center for Blind Adults. About three weeks before I was to begin, my rehabilitation counselor gave me three instructional books (the old Illinois Series) with which to learn Braille. His argument was simple, “You could just as well do something useful with your time while you are waiting to get into the Center, so why don’t you learn Braille?”

I went at it with gusto, and in the three weeks available to me I memorized the entire Braille code. I couldn’t read or write very fast, of course, but I committed the system itself to memory. Therefore, when somebody says that it’s too hard to learn Braille, I know from personal experience that this assertion is incorrect; in fact, it is just plain folly.

There is also the question of whether Braille is “too slow” to be useful for the average blind individual. I hadn’t been a student at the Iowa Center long, when I heard Dr. Jernigan read Braille as fast as he could waggle his tongue. Through the ensuing years, I have met many blind people who can read Braille just as rapidly as sighted people read print. Interestingly,

but not surprisingly, these people all share a common experience—they all learned to read and write and use Braille from the time they were tiny children. It is for this reason that I and other members of the NFB have worked so hard to require Braille instruction for small children.

In my own case, because of my late start, it took a month or so at the Center until I could read and write with any speed at all. Two other students and I practiced together for an hour or two each night in addition to the classes we had during the day, so we developed a reasonable—certainly a useable—speed before long.

I went on to use Braille all through college and law school, and it stood me in good stead. I took all class notes (ten or twelve pages an hour in law school) using the slate and stylus. I continued to use Braille as an essential tool throughout my working life, and I rely upon it heavily to this day.

B. The Illiteracy Crisis: Now let's examine the situation as it exists today. Here are startling and damning statistics. In 1963, 57 percent of all blind children across America could use Braille. Although it is pure speculation on my part, I suspect that the percentage in the 1930s and 1940s (before large print came along) would have been much nearer to 100 percent.

By 1993 (just thirty years later), the percentage had dropped from the outrageously low 57 percent to a devastating 10 percent 1963 – 1993)! This is a national disgrace, a tragedy, a CRISIS.

Likewise, the percentage of those unable to use either large print or Braille has increased by the same tragic proportions. While .012 percent of the blind children in America could use neither print nor Braille in 1963, this figure had risen to an abysmal 45 percent by 1993.

C. From Bad Philosophy to Bad Policy: Why has there been such a decline in Braille usage and literacy for blind children in America? What could have gone so terribly wrong with our programs to educate the blind and partially blind? There has to be a reason. Whatever it is, it borders on the criminal!

As I have thought about the problem, and as I have considered a series of negative factors which have contributed to the crisis, a thought has crystallized in my mind. While it is true that there are several symptoms to examine concerning the crisis, there is really only one overriding problem! It is that our educational system (not the U.S. Department of Education) has adopted (intentionally or otherwise) a bad philosophy about reading and writing for partially blind children. In time, this bad philosophy has actually evolved into an unwritten national policy, a bad national policy—"PRINT! USE PRINT AT ANY COST!" Also tucked away within the deep, dark recesses of this policy is an enormous negative philosophy: "DENIAL." Deny blindness at any cost.

What a development: Our entire educational system for blind kids has adopted a bad philosophy which literally has become a national policy concerning literacy for partially blind kids. As I look back at my

own experience at the Iowa School for the Blind, “use print at any cost” and “deny your blindness” was the philosophy. Never mind that the cost was high, and that I paid it. That bad philosophy had become the school’s policy, and the administration was not capable of altering it, even when a demonstrable need existed.

Now that I have come to realize that the culprit leading to the crisis is actually an entire, unwritten national policy, then it is easy to see how we have sunk to our current crisis level. As I have examined the problem, it seems to me that five specific pieces of what can only be described as a macabre puzzle emerge as significant parts of the sorry whole: These are the failure to employ the concept of consumerism, the large print movement, vision stimulation, technology and poorly prepared teachers of blind children.

D. The Problem

(1) The first of these five factors has to do with the concept of “CONSUMERISM.” If you are a service provider truly wishing to set good policy, then you will ask for information from those who know and whose lives are affected by the program—you will ask for this critical information right from the beginning when you are creating the policy.

If the specialists in the field of the education of blind children had thought to consult with competent and successful blind adults in the late 1940s and early 1950s (when the large print movement began), then I suspect that the entire “use print at any cost” fiasco might have been avoided.

Informed adults would have pressed for literacy through continued Braille instruction and the whole “sight-saving” (large print) movement could have been given proper emphasis. But, of course, the system did not seek out information from the true experts, and the first major mistake was made.

(2) The second factor leading to the current crisis was the “large print” movement itself. It was in the late 1940s and early 1950s that the “use print at any cost” philosophy took root and became national policy.

This ill-conceived policy at the Iowa School prompted officials to refuse to give me Braille, and I, at the time, also bought right in to the notion that denial was good. If I had come to the school only a few years earlier, Braille instruction would have been a given. I had simply experienced the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Unfortunately, my experience was not unique to me; it became the norm for blind kids across America.

(3) Once this philosophy became a national policy, it picked up momentum like a steamroller. The third critical factor leading to the current crisis was the introduction of the concept of “vision stimulation.” The theorists figured that if our national policy for blind children with some residual vision was to use print at any cost, “then let’s see if we can make these blind kids see better so that they can read print better.” There was actually an effort to make kids see better through practice and training. This was denial at

its absolute worst!

Vision stimulation was the natural extension of the original bad policy but, of course, it didn't work. You can see what you can see, and no amount of trying, or straining, or pleading can make it any better.

In my adult rehabilitation work, I met lots of young blind people who had experienced emotional damage from the effort to make them see what they could not see. Thankfully, this ill-conceived piece of the "use print at any cost" policy is on its way out.

The best evidence that vision stimulation is finished is this: Recently, Ferrell and Muir (1996) of the University of Northern Colorado wrote an article entitled, "A Call to End Vision Stimulation TRAINING." The article appeared in the American Foundation for the Blind's "Point/Counterpoint" section of the Journal of Blindness and Visual Impairment. The Foundation could find no one who would write in defense of this grievous error—vision stimulation. May it die a speedy and silent death.

(4) The fourth of the factors combining to make up the "USE PRINT AT ANY COST" policy involves technology. Adaptive technology for the blind is a wonderful and useful thing, when it is understood correctly and when it is used properly. But when it is used as a substitute for the ability to read and write competently—as a substitute for literacy—then it can cause untold damage, and it has.

In fact, with the over-use of technology, came a slight shift in emphasis and meaning of the original national "PRINT" policy. When technology was misused and abused, we moved beyond the original "use print at any cost" policy to an even more negative one, "AVOID BRAILLE AT ANY COST."

(5) Finally, the fifth factor is simply the natural and logical (though disastrous) extension of the first four. If we don't seek information from those who know what kind of policy we should establish as we are establishing it; if we determine that large print and denial are better than Braille, no matter how inefficient and slow print is; if we decide that since print is preferred no matter the cost, then we should simply make the blind children "see better"; and if we determine that technology is an adequate substitute for literacy, then it logically follows that teachers of the blind don't need to be particularly skilled in or able to use or teach Braille. And so we have had more than a generation of specialists who, since they were not good at Braille themselves, failed to give Braille proper emphasis and frequently failed to teach it at all to their blind students.

These five contributing factors, then, have emerged and flourished under our "use print at any cost" policy, and thousands of blind children have been the losers. The lives of many have been damaged forever because of this bad philosophy gone astray.

E. Solutions to the Problem: Where do we go from here? Can something be done to reverse the trend, to get

rid of the destructive “print” policy and to bring sanity back into the education of blind children? Thankfully, there is GOOD NEWS, and we have a chance! There is extremely positive action occurring on three fronts.

(1) First, Dr. Ruby Ryles of Louisiana Tech University has recently completed two Braille studies. The first (1996) demonstrated clearly that there is a significant nexus between an ability to read and write Braille competently and good jobs. This fact, alone, should stimulate specialists in the field to join up with the growing movement to re-emphasize Braille literacy.

Dr. Ryles’ second study (1997) is probably the most significant Braille research project of the twentieth century. She studied a large group of partially blind high school students. Half of them had used Braille throughout their entire educational experience, and the other half had always used print. Her study showed that the partially blind kids who had learned and used Braille from infancy were so far superior to those partially blind students who had used regular or large print that there was no comparison or room for argument when it came to performance. This finding applies to reading speed, comprehension, retention, spelling and grammar. In fact, her study showed that unlike the blind “print users,” those who had learned and used Braille from infancy functioned on a par with kids who had ordinary vision. The print users were not on the same playing field as their sighted peers.

Since the university master’s programs from throughout the country which train teachers of the blind rely upon objective testing rather than subjective opinion, past efforts by the NFB to convince the instructors that “Braille is better” have usually fallen on deaf ears. Now, however, when the proof is there as the result of two major, objective, professional studies, positive changes should be forthcoming regarding instructional philosophy and policy.

(2) Then, there is the new national Braille bill itself (1997), which was adopted by the Congress at the urging of the NFB. It requires that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each blind student in America will not start with a blank slate as it formerly did. The IEP for blind children will automatically provide for Braille instruction and the use of Braille unless all members of the IEP team determine, following a complete assessment, that Braille is not appropriate for a specific youngster. This new law, too, will drastically change the entire national approach toward Braille literacy and lend support to the literacy movement.

(3) Finally, there are the new state “Braille Bills.” Most require that book publishers provide the state with disks so that Braille texts can be made available inexpensively and almost instantly. Before long, one would hope, virtually all publishers will provide disks of textbooks routinely. And, to address the problem of teachers who don’t promote and teach Braille because they don’t know it themselves, most of the new state laws require that special education teachers for the

blind pass Braille Competency Tests in order to be able to teach.

In Section C of the Introduction to this book, I spoke of building a temple together—that is, developing and providing the best possible services for the blind so that rank-and-file blind people from across this land may become empowered and achieve true freedom. If specialists in work with the blind and the blind themselves, working through the National Federation of the Blind, can come to common understandings and arrive at common objectives, then there is no reason why this current crisis situation cannot be reversed immediately.

If we are persistent, if we are vigilant and if we continue our concerted action, then we can eliminate the destructive national “print” policy, and we can replace it with a policy which more appropriately and positively meets the needs of our blind children, a national policy which states, “BRAILLE—BRAILLE IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER. FOR THE AVERAGE BLIND PERSON, BRAILLE IS THE TRUE PASSPORT TO INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM!”

THE MODEL STATE AGENCY

An Independent Structure

The Defined Philosophy

The Independent Agency Board

The Independent Agency Staff

A Relationship with Consumer Organizations

Advocacy

Presumed Competence

The Orientation and Adjustment Center

Field Personnel

The Vending Facilities Program

The State Library

Job Placement

In Summary

Now that we have had a thorough discussion of the various aspects of a sound philosophy about blindness, the compelling reasons for a separate, independent state agency and the four ingredients involved integrally in proper training, it might be helpful for those involved with state agencies or orientation and adjustment centers to offer a chapter which summarizes the philosophy and basic structure of what we might call the ideal independent agency. To fill in all of the details, however, it will still be necessary fully to study and understand the information as set forth in the previous twelve chapters.

While some of the information included within this chapter will summarize points discussed in detail in previous chapters in order to paint a capsulized picture of the structure of the ideal, independent state agency, much of the information will be new and not covered elsewhere in this book. These previously undiscussed points are important because they deal specifically with various aspects of quality, independent state agencies and orientation and adjustment centers.

A. An Independent Structure: As was discussed in Chapter IV, experience has shown over and over again that blind customers have the best chance for high quality VR and IL services from a separate, independent state agency. First of all, the funding is always better. Also, there is at least the possibility of developing a staff which becomes expert in blindness; and there is at least the possibility that responsibility can be pinpointed, and staff members and admin-

istrators will not get themselves sidetracked on other superfluous issues or in other areas of someone's personal interest or preference.

Also, the independent structure offers the opportunity and freedom for the administrators to adopt and promote the defined philosophy so that the agency services can have the proper focus. When the agency for the blind is independent, administrators are not hampered by high officials from umbrella agencies—officials who possess no knowledge about what it takes properly to train and empower the average, blind customer. The independent agency administrator has the power and authority—the freedom—to do what is best in order effectively to serve blind customers.

On the other hand, I am not aware of a single case in this nation where blind customers get a fair shake under the superagency structure. Nor do I know of even one successful program where all disability groups are lumped into one giant pot of Mulligan stew.

One more compelling reason for an independent, state agency must be discussed and emphasized. The independent agency administrator and staff have the freedom to go directly to their governor and state legislature to deal with budgetary and other issues. On the other hand, being trapped within a giant umbrella usually means that agency for the blind administrators have their hands tied completely and cannot sell their programs themselves.

I am aware, for example, of a state where VR, IL and related services for the blind are not delivered through an independent agency, but the blind are served as a part of a general VR program. This program, in turn, is buried deeply within a huge superagency.

For as many as ten years, those in the agency concerned with blindness have known that additional funding was urgently needed, not only for more and better services for the older blind, but also to establish and operate a residential orientation and adjustment center. Each year, VR includes budget items for these urgent needs within its request to its own superagency. However, nothing has ever happened. Since the superagency obviously has no interest in the needs of that state's blind citizens, these requests have never been included within the superagency's askings from the Governor and legislature—they have never seen the light of day.

If this isn't bad enough, VR is then prohibited by its superagency from going directly to the Governor and legislature to fight for its own budgetary needs—only superagency personnel may do that. This problem alone should be reason enough to demonstrate to anyone why it is always poor business to be trapped within a superagency.

Now, assuming the independent agency structure has been selected, let's review and summarize those ingredients which have proven to be successful in good programs for the blind—ingredients such as a proper agency philosophy,

a committed Board, a knowledgeable and committed staff, an agency which advocates for its clients, and one with a quality adult orientation and adjustment center.

B. The Defined Philosophy: There must be a proper agency philosophy. The only philosophy about blindness I know of which really works in the day-to-day setting of a VR agency is the one I learned from my own state agency, the Iowa Commission for the Blind. It is summarized in Chapter II as follows:

(1) blind people are simply normal, ordinary people who cannot see;

(2) the blind are merely a cross-section of society as a whole, mirroring society in every way with the same hopes, interests and desires, the same dreams, abilities and potential as everyone else;

(3) the physical condition of blindness is nothing more than a normal, human characteristic, like the hundreds of others which, taken together, mold each of us into an unique human being;

(4) given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can do the average job in the average place of business, can have a family, can be a taxpaying and participating citizen and can be in every way a contributing member of society who can compete on terms of absolute equality with his or her sighted neighbors;

(5) with proper training and opportunity, blindness is not a tragedy. It literally

can be reduced to the level of a physical inconvenience or nuisance;

(6) the actual physical limitations associated with the characteristic of blindness can easily be overcome by using alternative techniques for doing without sight what you would do with sight if you had it;

(7) the concept of the hierarchy of sight—that is, the notion that the level to which a blind person can be competent and successful rises or falls in direct proportion to the amount of vision he or she has—is nothing more than a myth and is completely false;

(8) to sum it all up, “IT IS RESPECTABLE TO BE BLIND” and the blind, themselves, are primarily responsible for pushing back the frontiers of ignorance and changing what it means to be blind in the broader society;

(9) “You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.” That is, blind people cannot, on the one hand, use their blindness to get some advantage or something they want and then, on the other hand, demand equality and opportunity when it would be nice to have it—the blind deserve freedom and equality, yes, but hand-in-hand with equality comes responsibility; and, finally

(10) the real problem of blindness is not the physical loss of eyesight at all, but rather is to be found in the wide range of societal misunderstandings and misconceptions about blindness, shared by the blind and sighted alike. Putting it

quite bluntly, the blind are, in every sense of the word, a minority group, with all of the negative implications which this phrase conjures up.

As an integral part of the agency's defined philosophy, it must also have a strong commitment to and understanding of full empowerment for all of its customers. I have defined empowerment in Chapter V, Section C, as follows: "A service provider may be said to have "empowered" a blind customer to the extent that that customer is provided with the best possible tools—the emotional adjustment, the mastery of the alternative techniques, the ability to cope calmly with the misconceptions of others and the ability to blend into the broader society—which are essential to enable the blind person truly to take control of his or her life and to become the best that he or she is capable of becoming."

C. The Independent Agency Board: The agency's Board of Directors must be an integral part of the program. In the independent agency structure, the state Governor typically appoints the members of the policy-making Board (usually from three to five members). The Board then hires the Director, and the Director hires the staff.

While the Board's primary function is to meet periodically to serve as a sounding-board for the director's ideas and to set broad policy for the agency, good Board members will also take the time to learn about blindness and to develop a real understanding about the agency's defined philosophy and routine services. Board

members should also be willing to use their time and personal contacts to help sell the program to the general public and to elected officials, and to talk with employers about hiring the agency's qualified blind customers. I contend that it is quite all right—in fact, it is desirable—for a Board member to be willing to "lean" on a business associate if it might secure a job for an agency customer!

D. The Independent Agency

Staff: The staff must consist of persons—both blind and sighted—who truly believe in the blind and who are committed to doing whatever it takes to pass on that belief to others. In other words, the staff members must have embraced the proper, defined philosophy about blindness completely. Also, they must operate from the empowerment motive, and they must recognize that their only reason for having a state job is to serve and empower their blind customers, not simply to protect and promote their own vested interests.

If the staff members are sighted, they must be willing to undergo extensive training under sleepshades. They must come to know that functioning without using vision is possible. They also must be prepared to demonstrate to fearful new customers or to employers that they (the staff members) can function without vision.

If the prospective staff members are blind, then they must be blind people who have adjusted completely to their own blindness. They must be willing

to use Braille, the white cane and other alternative techniques openly and freely. Also, the ideal situation is to find and recruit competent people who have been successful in competitive employment. Such blind specialists can serve as true role models for the agency's customers.

E. A Relationship with Consumer Organizations: The independent agency—from the Board to the Director to the staff—must be willing to “listen” to what the blind have to say and to work in a spirit of partnership with the members of the organized blind movement. These are the persons affected directly by the services, and they have the right to have a voice in what those services will be. Through their collective action and experiences, they know well what works and what doesn’t—what is good for blind customers and what is bad. Also, a true partnership between the independent agency and the blind is virtually unstoppable when it comes to legislative and budgetary issues.

As bizarre and outdated as it is, some agency personnel continue to operate on the tired and worn out philosophy that, “We know what is best for you.” This thinking should have vanished along with the twentieth century.

F. Advocacy: The quality independent agency must be an advocate for the civil rights of all blind persons in the state in which it is located. The agency must be willing to become involved in civil rights issues and to have confrontations when necessary.

However, agency administrators and personnel must also be mindful of the fact that the agency does not “represent” its customers. Only those elected by the blind can do that.

G. Presumed Competence: The good agency will operate on the “presumption” that all of its blind customers are capable of doing something. It must understand and believe that its customers have sufficient intelligence to choose wisely what they can and want to do. Incidentally, like sighted persons, they should also have the freedom to choose unwisely.

The quality agency’s primary role is to help the customer achieve the maximum empowerment possible for him or her by helping to develop self-confidence, skills and a mastery of coping with the public attitudes about blindness. When this is achieved correctly, the customer can then decide what he or she wishes to do.

Once this decision is made by the blind customer, the agency should do its very best to help that individual prepare for the chosen employment objective. Therefore, agency testing and evaluation should be kept to a minimal level.

H. The Orientation and Adjustment Center: The heart of any good state VR program for the blind is an effective, residential orientation and adjustment center in which customers may become fully immersed in positive information about blindness. In many situations, the center will be a branch or division of the state agency itself. It is

also workable, however, for a state agency that does not have a state-operated center to learn about and send its customers to the best nonprofit centers in the area. This is particularly true in today's era of informed choice.

There are many factors involved in the operation of a quality orientation center. A summary of the most critical factors is as follows:

(1) The most basic issue of all is that employees of the independent state agency understand that orientation and adjustment training is the very heart of the VR process and should be the first step on the road to full empowerment for the blind. Then, the administrators and personnel must come to understand what kind of adjustment to blindness service it takes to empower rank-and-file customers, and the state agency must do what it can to encourage its customers to attend the quality program.

State agency staff members must learn about proper training and what specific techniques and services it takes to provide it. As I pointed out in Chapter VII, Section B, each blind customer needs four specific things to become truly independent and self-sufficient. Therefore, the quality orientation and adjustment center must provide the specific services that are necessary to attain these four goals.

Let me state the four ingredients once more in this summary chapter:

a) The blind person must come emotionally, not just intellectually, to know that he or she truly can be independent and

self-sufficient;

b) The blind person must really learn and become competent in those skills—the alternative techniques of blindness—which will make it possible for him or her truly to be independent and self-sufficient;

c) The blind person must learn to cope on a daily basis with the public attitudes about blindness—with those things which will be said or done to him or her because of other people's misunderstandings and misconceptions; and

d) Even when the blind individual has adjusted emotionally to blindness, even when the alternative techniques have been mastered and even when he or she has learned to cope effectively with the demeaning things other people do or say, the blind person must also learn to "blend in" and to be acceptable to others. He or she must be punctual, reliable, neat and appropriate in appearance and possessed of good social and table manners, and the like. Since the ordinary blind person needs to learn to blend in and to be acceptable to society for maximum success, the schools and agencies must do the very best that they can to make sure that this desired result is achieved.

(2) The orientation and adjustment center—whether it be state-operated or private—must be "pre-vocational" in nature. That is, it should be a place where individuals can "learn how to be blind" before vocational training is undertaken. Later, vocational training should be purchased or provided to the customers

wherever sighted people in the area get theirs. This vocational training must be integrated with the sighted since, presumably, the blind will work along side the sighted for the rest of their lives.

(3) Such a center must be an “attitude factory” that teaches the defined philosophy discussed in Chapter II. It must be a place where blind customers from throughout a state can come to live on a residential basis. There, they will acquire hope, self confidence, the knowledge that it is respectable to be blind, and the basic skills and alternative techniques that they will need. In a nutshell, the center should employ the adjustment to blindness techniques outlined in chapters VII through XI.

(4) The atmosphere must be such that, twenty-four-hours a day, seven days a week, the center student is being told, “Come on, you can do it, you can do more,” and there must be blind staff members available who can serve as role models and who when a student says, “I can’t do it,” can say, “Look, my friend, I’m as blind as you are. I know what can be done and how it can be done, so don’t say you can’t, just do it!”

The center has to help the student get to the point where he or she can say, “Yes, I am blind, so what? I like myself, and I’m OK! I can do what I want to do.” If the center doesn’t build self-confidence and self-esteem, then nothing else it can do makes any difference.

(5) The center should call students, “students.” Some rehabilitation facilities

refer to their customers as trainees, clients or even patients. The center must understand blindness and the importance of using the most positive terminology it can—student.

When I directed the Iowa center, I found that it was much easier emotionally for a blind Iowa resident to leave his or her home to be a “student” at the “school” in Des Moines than to be a patient in some state institution. Also, as a practical matter, “student” is the word we use in our society for one who is in a school or learning setting, so why not use it here.

(6) Blindness must be discussed, and the word “blind” must be used and stressed constantly. If the blind are ever to accept their own blindness, then they must first admit that they are, and the agency which simply reinforces and perpetuates denial is useless.

Like the black persons who attempted to solve their problems by pretending that they were white, blind persons who pretend that they are sighted are fooling themselves and are copouts. Blacks ultimately worked to solve their problems by making it respectable to be black, and the blind will solve their problems by making it respectable to be blind! Therefore, such phrases as “unsighted,” “sightless,” “visually impaired” or “hard-of-seeing,” should not be used in the center.

(7) There must be frank individual and group discussions about blindness. Students must learn the defined philosophy intellectually through discussion. Then,

to set those ideas into honest emotions, they must be required to perform a variety of experiential tasks which teach them emotionally that they really can function, and that there honestly can be a normal, happy and productive life ahead.

It is through these frank discussions about blindness that center students begin to learn to cope with the strange and unusual things other people will do or say because of their misunderstandings and misconceptions about blindness. It is also through these discussions that students must learn to examine and alter their own self-limiting views.

(8) The center must be located in a busy, urban area. Many centers are currently found in secluded locations, away from people and possible danger. However, if the purpose of the center is truly to help blind customers become a part of society, then training should be where the action is.

The facility should be near enough to restaurants, stores, theatres, churches and other places to which the public is invited that the students have a reason to leave it. Much confidence building is achieved simply by going out into the world to meet routine, daily needs.

Under no circumstances should an orientation and adjustment center be housed together with a sheltered workshop for the blind. Where this is done, the work of the good center is virtually cancelled out. A good program can-present the best philosophical training in the world in its center, but the blind customers—particu-

larly the newer ones—will only see and identify with those poor blind people who have been beaten down by the system and placed in the shop for employment. These blind shop workers will only serve to validate the views of the newly blinded individual. This is the concept of “role models,” but in reverse.

Just as an aside, when a center is being constructed or renovated, center personnel should contact and work with state officials to have the center exempted from certain accessibility requirements such as those calling for detectable warnings at the top of steps, and the like. Blind customers “must” learn to rely on the white cane to give them needed information about steps or other obstacles. The creation, in the name of accessibility, of an artificial environment in the training center will actually place customers at great risk when they are traveling and working in the real world where these special warning devices do not exist. If the training has been done properly, customers will be perfectly safe in the world as it is.

I was able to achieve this objective at the new Alaska Center for the Blind. However, let me be very clear about what I am saying. I am referring only to detectable warning devices for the blind. The facility, of course, must meet accessibility requirements for people using wheelchairs.

(9) The center students should be treated as adults, not children. Therefore, there should be no “hours” at the center, nor should there be bedchecks. Adults come and go as they please.

In both the Iowa and Alaska centers, I gave each student a set of keys to the building. This, in and of itself, indicates faith and trust; it also reinforces the belief that people become what you expect them to become.

(10) The same training curriculum should be required for all customers at the center rather than having one kind of training for the totally blind and another for the partially blind.

If center administrators understand that the major problem of blindness is attitudinal, and if they intend to teach a proper philosophy, then all students must have the same training. There are, of course, differences on the level of concentration which may or may not be given to certain subjects, but the initial core classes should be the same for all students.

(11) All students, whether they are partially or totally blind, should be required to use long, non-folding canes at all times (see Chapter VII, Section E). In some centers canes are used only during travel class. However, if the customer wishes to travel well and to be independent, he or she must use the cane over and over until its proper use becomes a reflex action. In addition, use of the cane helps to build self confidence and helps the student admit and accept the fact that he or she is blind. "Denial" is eliminated.

(12) The blind students with some remaining usable vision should use "sleepshades" during all training (see Chapter

VIII, Section C). The great temptation for students with some vision is to attempt to utilize that vision even when it is totally useless. They also like to try to pretend that they are sighted through the use of visual techniques. The reason for this is simple. People want to be "normal." They think that it is normal to be sighted. They think that if they use blind techniques they are not normal. False logic, but that is how our minds work until someone intervenes with the truth.

If the customer is blind enough to be at the center, he or she is "blind!" Limited vision will not be useful in many situations. Therefore, the student must learn alternative techniques, learn that they work, learn not to be ashamed of using them, and learn during training to use the combination of alternative and visual techniques best suited to that individual's unique visual limitations.

Following this type of training, the customer will be in the best possible position for the rest of his or her life to know when to use sight or when to use an alternative technique. Putting this another way, when sleepshades are used, the partially blind student can learn to use his or her remaining vision efficiently.

(13) All students must be trained in Braille (see Chapter IX, Section A and Chapter XII). While some students with partial vision may argue that they don't need Braille, everyone should be exposed to it. The student may come to understand and learn that it is more efficient than he or she had thought, and that reading large print at ten or fifteen words a minute

isn't so hot after all. It is then up to each customer to determine how far he or she wishes to go using Braille.

(14) Proper practices must be established concerning eating and, no, I don't mean techniques of daily living. To assume that all students need classes in the techniques of daily living is insulting and teaches a negative philosophy rather than a positive one. Of course, sometimes a specific student may need help in this area, particularly students who have come out of residential schools for the blind. When this situation occurs, staff members should work with this individual quietly and privately.

Referring back to eating, I was leading up to a discussion of an unique problem and an interesting, Iowa policy we used for handling it. Many newly blinded people are embarrassed to eat in front of sighted people. Therefore, they are quite content to have someone serve them in the seclusion of a group dining room or even in the privacy of a bedroom.

To overcome this fear, at the Iowa Commission we had a public cafeteria right in the building where the students could buy their breakfasts and lunches if they chose. They went through the line themselves with the other public customers. However we closed the cafeteria for evenings and on weekends, and the students went out to public restaurants for these meals.

Along with this practice, we had a rule that students could not cook in their rooms, nor could more veteran students bring

meals to the newer ones. The obvious intent of this practice was to get students out into the community where they could get accustomed to being seen and stared at. The only way for a customer to overcome this fear of functioning or eating in front of others is to do it over and over again.

(15) The good center should have no psychologists or psychiatrists on its staff. Students should be presumed to be mentally fit. The center is already working to overcome stereotypical thinking about blindness. The reality is that there are also very negative attitudes and stereotypes about psychologists and psychiatrists—"Only crazy people see them." Therefore, the student who is forced to see a therapist on a daily or weekly basis will simply believe that things are even worse than he or she had thought.

Am I opposed to all psychologists or psychiatrists? Of course not! On a rare occasion, some center student may develop emotional problems. If this occurs, center personnel should send that student to a competent professional. The center specialists must be careful, though, to choose the professional wisely. If this is not done, the therapist unfamiliar with enlightened attitudes about blindness will most likely try to help the student "adjust" to blindness in a manner which will help no one.

If the center staff members can't tell the difference between a normal fear of blindness and a real emotional problem, then the staff had better be replaced. Administrators should not use this fear as a reason for bringing in the psychologists or psychiatrists.

(16) There should be no house mothers or baby sitters in the center. The students' time is valuable, and they should have competent staff members available to work with them during evenings and on weekends. Therefore, there should be experienced staff members available at all times to help solve problems, give counsel, and talk about all aspects of blindness. I know that in most centers this does not occur, and house parents are on hand, but our objective should be to achieve the ideal.

(17) The students should be exposed to organizations of the blind and to successful blind persons. This point surely speaks for itself and needs no elaboration (see Chapter VI, Section D).

(18) The center should be able to house from twenty to twenty-five or so students at any one time. A family atmosphere and relationship must be created between students and teachers. If the student population becomes too large, the closeness and the trust and spirit are lost.

On the issue of relationships between teachers and students, there are differences of opinion. At a rehabilitation conference held some years ago, a center director announced as part of a presentation that he would fire any teacher who became friendly with students. Dr. Kenneth Jernigan then got up and said, "I will fire any teacher who will not establish a personal friendship with students."

(19) Students learn at different rates. Therefore, no fixed training time period should be established in advance for

students. Fifty years of experience have taught us that it usually takes from six to nine months for the average student to adjust emotionally and to master the skills. On a rare occasion, a student will need to remain for more than nine months before he or she truly gets it. A student should stay until the student, the teachers and the director all agree that the time has come for him or her to go.

(20) Many centers observe the practice of having new students remain at the center for the first month of training. This is done to help the new student get a jump start on his or her training toward independence.

The problem giving rise to such a policy is this: A newly blinded individual will usually be overprotected, sheltered and denied independence in the home setting. The family and friends don't know what to do. They love the individual and want to show love, kindness and support. Therefore, they smother the individual with kindness; "Do you want coffee? I'll get it for you." "You just sit here, I'll bring you the ashtray." "Be careful, I'll carry that for you." "You don't have to help with the dishes, just sit here and talk to me."

These things happen constantly. If such a blind person leaves this safety net for training, he or she will begin to learn independence immediately at the quality center. But if he or she goes home the very first weekend, well-meaning family members and friends will unwittingly undo what was started during the week.

On the other hand, if he or she stays for at least a month at the center, the expectation—based upon experience—is that most students will have become sufficiently excited about independence to withstand the onslaught of kindly meant help when they first go home.

I. Field Personnel: Leaving the discussion of the orientation center and returning to broader issues of the state agency, there should be competent home teachers and VR counselors who truly believe in the capacities of the blind and who can motivate blind persons from throughout the state, and they must be persistent. That is, if a newly blinded person resists the acceptance of services from the agency after only one or two contacts, then these field personnel should keep returning and trying.

I raise this issue here since I am aware of service providers whose policy is to leave the customer alone after only one visit. The problem with this philosophy is that virtually every newly blinded adult will begin by believing that no amount of state service can help him or her. Therefore, that potential customer will summarily reject the offer of training. Sometimes it takes coaxing to convince such a person just to try.

Of course, this should not be confused with trying to “force” the blind person to accept services which he or she truly does not want. However, a person has the right to “informed choice,” but such a choice can be made only after the individual has learned enough to be “informed.”

J. The Vending Facilities Program: Then there is the matter of vending facilities. Blind vendors should truly run the businesses themselves. In many states, however, the state agencies actually run the facilities and the blind managers are only glorified cashiers.

If the agency truly believes that blind people can function competitively and independently, then the agency should let them run the businesses. The blind managers should do their own supervising, hiring, firing, purchasing, price-setting, and bookkeeping.

K. The State Library: The library for the blind should be part of the independent state agency for the blind. Experience has shown that the service is much better and more coordinated when this is the case. Rehab gets referrals through the library, and vice versa.

Also, under the right conditions, federal rehabilitation dollars can be put into the state library when it is a part of the state agency. Dr. Jernigan had worked out this arrangement with federal rehabilitation officials when he directed the Iowa Commission for the Blind.

L. Job Placement: Finally, let me write briefly about employment. High quality job placement is the final step in the VR process.

Job placement is handled in two different ways around the country. In many states, a job placement specialist is assigned specifically to work on placements. In others,

including Iowa, the counselors do their own placements. Since I know that this system works well, I favor this model.

Agency VR counselors (or placement specialists) should spend a good part of their time in getting to know business owners, personnel officers, department heads, etc., within their territories. A positive atmosphere should be created by these counselors so that by the time the individual blind customer is ready for employment, interviews and possible jobs will be already available. The objective in any state should be that any blind person who wants to work and who is willing to undergo the proper training recommended by the agency can get a high quality job.

The second major part of the job placement issue has to do with employer and public education. In Iowa, virtually every day of the year (and often many times on the same day) a Commission employee or the center students were speaking and presenting programs for Lions and other civic organizations, churches, schools and business associations. We also put on exhibits at the Iowa State Fair and at some county fairs.

It took time and lots of effort, but through the years the Iowa Commission for the Blind became the best-known agency of state government, and rank-and-file Iowa citizens had become well-acquainted with blind people. The effort of any state agency must be to create an atmosphere in which the empowered blind are accepted as normal people who can find good jobs when their training has been completed and they are ready for employment.

M. In Summary: This, then, is a brief summary of what it takes to have a quality state agency for the blind. Since the best governmental structure is known, since the defined philosophy is known and proven, and since the proper training techniques are known and have been tried and tested over and over again, this model should provide a general outline for a quality state services for the blind program.

IF YOUR HORSE IS DEAD, DISMOUNT

*Back to the Beginning
“Consumerism” and a Fanciful Analogy
Go to the Source*

An often-used colloquialism says, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” This folksy, home-spun bit of philosophy makes evidently good sense. There is, however, an implied converse to the saying. “If it is broke, fix it!” This is also wise logic and evidently sensible.

It has also been pointed out in countless ways that there is no point in beating a dead horse. No matter how much you beat it, it still won’t do the job which needs to be done.

A. Back to the Beginning: To begin this chapter, I can do no better than to quote the first few paragraphs from the Introduction to this book:

As America enters the twenty-first century, statistics show that between seventy and eighty percent of her working-age blind people are unemployed (Kirchner, 1999). Of those who are employed, far too many are severely underemployed or are destined to be locked in at entry-level jobs for a lifetime. WHY? How can this be, particularly at a time when America’s unemployment rate is the lowest it has been for nearly thirty years, and when employers are begging for reliable and quality employees?

Putting to one side all of the bogus rationalizations, there can be but two possible answers to these questions. First, either blind people as a class, no matter how thoroughly trained and adjusted to their blindness they may be, are inherently incompetent and lacking in the most basic human abilities; or, second, there has been something inherently wrong with

IF YOUR HORSE IS DEAD, DISMOUNT

the blindness system in America—the complex of programs for educating or rehabilitating people who are blind.

The answer is simple, if distressing. There is nothing inherently wrong with the blind as a class of people! There simply is too much objective proof to the contrary among the blind who have received proper training to support this view. However, until recently there has been something inherently wrong with the blindness system. The system has been flawed in three areas: First, too many specialists involved in the education of blind children have not understood blindness and thus have not learned what it takes to provide proper training. They have not come to understand that the blind are a minority and that adjustment services, no matter what those services may be, must be aimed at teaching the blind a new, constructive and positive set of attitudes about blindness. Second, too many people involved in providing Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and related services for blind adults have shared the same deficiencies. Third, certain provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have been misinterpreted and have served to make many blind people helpless and dependent rather than independent and self-sufficient. The lure of custodialism has become blurred with the issue of disability rights.

Putting it very directly, the inherent problem is that too many of the people running and working in most of the programs have been thinking, living and teaching in the past—they have not

learned to think and dream and teach outside of the box. They have not captured the vision of new and enlightened training philosophies, practices and techniques. Therefore, they have failed properly to train and empower the blind. To compound this problem, while the blind themselves—working through the National Federation of the Blind—have experimented, studied and learned the secrets to full empowerment and freedom for the blind, too many of the specialists in the field have failed to work with and learn these known secrets from the blind. It is this resulting lack of knowledge about proper training and education which has primarily been responsible for our inordinately high unemployment rate.

To be fair about it, I must hasten to add that the schools, the public and private agencies and the misinterpretation of the ADA have not been completely at fault for the high unemployment rate. Although the blind are not primarily responsible, I might briefly point out here—detailed explanations will follow—that the blind, themselves, are what might be referred to as a secondary part of the problem. Being a minority group in every negative sense of the word the blind as a class have fallen into the trap of social conditioning and have bought into the erroneous concepts of the hierarchy of sight and vision dependency. Therefore, the blind have contributed to the high unemployment rate because they typically have sold themselves short and have not reached their full potential.

Then, too, while the ADA has many redeeming features, the misinterpretation

of certain of its provisions and purposes has only served to exacerbate this already troublesome situation. Far from being the help it was intended to be, for many blind college students certain provisions of the ADA have become a devilish wolf in sheep's clothing. The result is what some refer to as "learned dependency."

The present, appalling unemployment statistics should outrage the sincere devotee of quality services for the blind. What this dismal statistic indicates is that the educational and VR programs and the ADA historically have simply failed the blind. In the more than a century of educational programs, in the fifty-seven years since the blind were included within VR programs, and in the ten years of ADA protection, the vision for the future and the secrets to empowerment and freedom have not been discovered by many specialists in the blindness system. They have not come to know and passionately embrace a proven formula for success!

If America can put a man on the moon, why can't it put the blind of this nation to work with meaningful and responsible jobs—in "high quality" employment? Why can't average blind people take control of their own lives and have significant and rewarding roles to play in their families, their communities and in society at large? The fact is that ordinary blind people can take their rightful place in society if they receive proper training and are empowered.

As is the case with many of the more enlightened state agencies for the blind,

the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education (RSA) is keenly aware of the distressing unemployment statistics among people of working age who are blind. To offer an alternative solution to the problem, RSA has commissioned me to provide technical assistance and support by developing a book which offers a "non-traditional" perspective on the methods and issues which a truly successful employment training program for the blind should embrace. The book is to include information uniquely tailored both for blind audiences and for those providing professional preparation services to them. The ultimate objective is to offer information best designed to promote the goals of increased personal independence, "informed choice" and empowerment.

This monograph is the result of the project. I am confident that the knowledge about blindness and proper training for the blind that I and others from the National Federation of the Blind have gained over my nearly forty years of work and experience in this field will be used to make a difference—to empower thousands of rank-and-file blind people across this country. The truth about blindness is known; the techniques for providing proper training are known; and the best methods for delivering services for the blind are known. They have been tried, tested and proven over and over again, and they work. In other words, there presently is a known formula for success!

B. Consumerism and a Fanciful Analogy: Some years ago I was asked to participate at a state conference, speaking

on the question of what it takes for a program for the blind to provide quality, meaningful services—to be the ideal. We were seeking answers to the question of how best to achieve real empowerment and freedom for average blind people. The panel included an official of a state agency for the blind, and he spoke immediately before me. From comments he made, it was clear that he had a deep and sincere interest in the well being of the blind.

Even though he was committed to quality services, he went on to remark that the topic of “what constitutes the ideal program for the blind” was a very difficult one. He described several problems which exist within the current service delivery systems, but he never really offered concrete notions of what the ideal program should be; he just maintained that it was a difficult topic—what lawyers call a “knotty problem.”

In my presentation, I told the previous speaker and conference attendees that I did not regard the topic as difficult at all. In fact, it is simple, well-known and clear-cut: The best governmental structure for a state agency is known; the ideal defined philosophy (the truth about blindness) is known; what should be taught (the secret to empowerment) at a school or orientation and adjustment center is known; the proper role for the school or agency specialists is known; how best to educate employers and the rest of the sighted public about blindness is known; and it is also well known that certain existing school and agency practices hurt rather than help their blind customers and should, therefore, be

eliminated. In other words, **THE IDEAL HAS BEEN TRIED AND TESTED, AND IT WORKS! A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS EXISTS!**

I went on to say that while the topic of what constitutes the ideal school or agency for the blind is not difficult at all, there is, however, a different question which is the real one and which is difficult—”How can the blind—the consumers—get the specialists who run the schools and agencies to listen and learn and come to understand the information which already exists. And then, how can these specialists be persuaded to think outside of the box and to use this previously tested and proven knowledge in the day-to-day operation of the programs which they administer?”

At this point the conference discussion shifted from the topic of the ideal program for the blind to the question of “consumer input.” I pointed out that as we enter the twenty-first century, virtually everyone throughout the general public has come to understand the true value of consumerism and that the people affected by programs—the members of whatever minority it may be—have an undeniable right to have a voice in what those programs should and will be.

Eventually, I presented an analogy which, while a bit fanciful, is instructive on the concept of consumerism: Let us suppose, I said, that we have a group of doctors (gynecologists) who have decided to gather the best available data on the topic of those techniques and medications which are best and most effective for

childbearing—they questioned whether they should recommend anesthesia, natural child birth, saddle block, hypnosis, under-water birth, or something else.

Suppose, further, that these doctors truly wish to provide the best possible care and treatment for their patients. And, finally, suppose that they are a remarkable lot—completely free-thinking and openminded, no bias, no prejudice, no vested interests to protect, no axes to grind, no political agenda to cloud the purpose of the discussion, no pseudo science to which to give validity, and no ego problems with which to cope.

This enlightened, if unusual, group would have various choices to make in determining how best to acquire the desired knowledge. First, they could simply decide to discuss the issue among themselves and reach a consensus, or they could be democratic and take a vote. But this process would give only a narrow and limited view based upon their own attitudes and experiences.

Of course, they could put the question to the professors in their medical schools. But, while some new thinking might be forthcoming, for the most part, this would be the same old notions since the college professors would be the very people who had taught our doctors and who had, therefore, given them their current information and had helped to formulate their current attitudes.

One forward-looking doctor might say, "Well, then, let's ask the man on the street." To which another doctor, probably

a woman, might reply, "Why ask men? They haven't had babies! They actually don't know the first thing about it! I think we should ask women!"

After some discussion, some member of this enlightened group would see the next logical step and say, "But you can't just ask 'any' woman, since not all women have had babies! No, I think that the only really valid source of information will be those women who have had babies and can, therefore, discuss actual experiences with us."

It might take a little time and discussion to move beyond this plateau in thinking and to arrive at the next point in this chain of thought, but, ultimately, the real thinker in the group, probably the woman, would say, "As I think about it, I don't believe it would be enough simply to raise our question with women who, while they have had babies and received our services, remain isolated. As individuals, many women who have had babies still have never really had the opportunity to think about what is best—they only know about what happened to them. They may have no familiarity with the methods and procedures which they have not experienced. Many times, because of their limited experience, such women would not even be aware of the various techniques which have been developed and tried by other doctors and other women in other places."

At this point we could have the final breakthrough! Another doctor might say, "I think I've got it! If we really care about what is best for our patients, we can't

IF YOUR HORSE IS DEAD, DISMOUNT

just sit here and decide among ourselves by taking a vote; we can't seek advice from men; we can't seek the opinions of women who have never had babies; and we can't even turn to just any women who have! The solution for us is to find a group of women who have born children and who have also seen fit to join together with others to discuss the variety of issues concerned with motherhood and childbearing. By bringing together those women who have experienced a variety of procedures and techniques into a group where the issue is freely and openly discussed and debated, a body of knowledge would surely exist based upon the best thinking of those who have experienced our services in the past and who have seen fit to join together for concerted action. This group, I think, would know best what our services should be for our patients who will bear children in the future."

And another doctor might wrap it up by saying, "Well, you are all aware of the existence of the National Federation of Mothers Concerned with Childbearing. They have been around since 1940, but I have always been told that they are too militant and that I shouldn't pay much attention to what they have to say—after all, it has been pretty generally understood in the field that they are just women who have had babies and have joined together to talk about it, not specialists, so what could they possibly know about our services? But I've got to tell you that after our discussion here today, I'm all for talking to those organized women! I'm convinced that they could give us some sound data from the body of knowledge which they possess!"

End of analogy; end of parable; end of parallel.

Let me hasten to point out that I am not suggesting for one minute that blind customers who receive services from schools or state agencies are patients needing medical help. Far from it! The blind are simply ordinary, normal human beings who cannot see and who may be in need of meaningful training to achieve empowerment and personal freedom.

What I am suggesting with this parallel is simple—the age of enlightenment in work with the blind is here, and the time has come when consumerism must take its rightful place in the field of work with the blind, and drastic changes must be made. The appallingly high unemployment rate among the blind can no longer be tolerated—the system is broken. Since the old horse is dead, we should dismount and climb on a new one. Why continue to rely upon a recipe for failure when a known formula for success exists?

As it is with expectant mothers, so it is with the blind. If we as service providers have an honest desire to offer the best possible empowerment to the greatest number of the blind whom we serve—if we really wish to know what is best—we will not simply discuss the question of ideal programs and services in a vacuum. Nor will we try to find all of the answers in a meeting of blindness specialists. We will not seek our counsel solely from university professors or from sighted persons on the street who have no knowledge or experience on issues concerning blindness.

We will not seek our counsel from people who, although blind, have never been the recipients of educational, IL or VR services for the blind, and we will not put much stock in the advice which we might receive from those blind people who have received services, but who are limited, isolated, and totally lacking in broad knowledge and experience.

The difficulty with gathering information from the so-called “independent” blind is this: If they don’t know what possibilities exist for the blind, if they don’t know what services other blind people have had, if they don’t know what happens in other states, if they don’t even know what can be done under the education or VR laws, then the possible value of their limited opinions will be extremely narrow or even non-existent.

C. Go to the Source: If service providers with the empowerment motive are troubled by the failure of the present blindness systems—if they truly have an honest desire to acquire the best possible information about services for the blind, they will go to the source which possesses a vast body of knowledge based upon real life experiences and the pooled and distilled wisdom and thinking of thousands of the blind. They will seek out the organized blind, the National Federation of the Blind.

As I have previously said, the information about empowerment and freedom for the blind already exists, and it works. It will be a tremendous breakthrough in the field of work with the blind when we encounter a remarkable group of blind-

ness specialists like those enlightened doctors in my analogy—completely free thinking and open minded, no biases, no prejudices, no vested interests to protect, no axes to grind, no political agenda to cloud the purpose of the discussion, no pseudo science to which to give validity, and no ego problems with which to cope. Such individuals will be able to take an objective look at new ideas and to think outside of the box.

What remains is for rank-and-file service providers who are people of good will and who possess the “empowerment motive” to take a fresh look at the enormous problems of unemployment among the blind. They must look honestly for the source of the problem. They must recognize and admit that the horse is dead. Then, they also need to take a good faith and open minded look at the systems and techniques for providing proper training which have been developed and fine-tuned by the blind through the NFB. The secrets to full empowerment and freedom exist and are available for the taking.

As I said in the Introduction, I invite serious traditional researchers to look at and study the salient points which I have presented in this book. We absolutely must break the cycle of dependency which now exists. When the organized blind and the blindness specialists join together for concerted action, we will be unstoppable, and the blind of tomorrow and of future generations will be the fortunate beneficiaries.

A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

Freedom and the Realization of Self-Esteem

Freedom and the Realization of Self-Esteem

Freedom, once tasted, is irresistible, and it can fuel the passion and give birth and hope to the dream. If proper training and quality services from a state agency for the blind and full participation in the National Federation of the Blind could alter the course of my life completely and give me total freedom and independence—if I “know what it feels like to be free,” then why shouldn’t every other blind person in America have the same chance for freedom—for empowerment? This is my earnest hope. Words are simply inadequate to describe the feelings associated with true freedom.

The purpose for this book has been to share the secrets of full empowerment and freedom for the blind with the entire community of workers in the field. Whether we are specialists in work with the blind or members of the organized blind movement, our objective should be a common one—full empowerment and freedom for the blind of America.

In Chapter V, I offered what I believe to be a very workable definition of empowerment. I pointed out that, a service provider may be said to have “empowered” a blind customer to the extent that that customer is provided with the best possible tools—the emotional adjustment, the mastery of the alternative techniques, the ability to cope calmly with the misconceptions of others and the ability to blend into the broader society—which are essential to enable the blind person truly to take control of his or her life and to become the best that he or she is capable of becoming.

To re-emphasize a passage from the Introduction:

In addition to the fact that this enlightened and revolutionary body of knowledge now exists, there is other positive news. First, more and more of the state agencies are forming partnerships with and learning from the blind. Also, the federal laws—the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, together with the rules and regulations developed and promulgated under each by the United States Department of Education—offer ample legislative authority to carry out meaningful and innovative programs based upon the empowerment model.

In spite of these two positive facts, however, a frustrating reality for those of us who have worked to discover and develop the secrets to empowerment and freedom is that historically there has been a reluctance on the part of many blindness specialists to listen or give much credence to what the organized blind have had to say. Apparently they had bought into the old saw that “when the blind lead the blind, all will stumble and fall into the ditch.”

Now, however, since the evidence is indisputable that the present educational and VR systems are not working sufficiently well, it is time to try something new. Interestingly for those of us who are blind, we have come to understand that it was only when the blind began to lead the blind that we did not fall into the ditch but rose up out of it together.

In the Introduction and first fourteen chapters of this book, I have presented detailed information about the secrets to full empowerment and freedom for the blind. There is information about methods for breaking the cycle of dependency—breaking out of the trap of social conditioning—and how to close the loop on the empowerment circle. There is data on how best to get rid of the practice of the soft bigotry of low expectations. The information is there as to how to give our customers a new and constructive way of looking at their blindness. All of the information is there for the taking. This is a new day, and there must be a new spirit of harmony and partnership between service providers and the consumers if the blind are ever to achieve freedom and if specialized schools and programs for the blind are to survive and flourish. The time has come when rank-and-file specialists in the blindness system need to listen to and work with the organized blind in order to reform and renew what clearly are outdated and failed systems.

It is a new millennium and a new era. As we look to the future, the blind of America deserve a fair chance—a new chance—to escape the bonds of slavery. Slavery does not necessarily have to be a matter of chains and whips. For far too many untrained and unempowered blind people, the slavery has been a captivity of the mind and a shackling of the soul and spirit. It may well be that the greatest shackles human beings ever have to overcome are those internalized because of their own fears and insecurities, and proper training can remove these obstacles.

In the Introduction, I told of the young wheelchair users who wrote the song, "I wonder what it would feel like to be free." I do not believe that these young people were being overdramatic in their assessment of their station in life, and it is not overdramatic when untrained and unemployed blind Americans describe the same feelings. Blindness, without proper training and empowerment, can be devastating, a veritable hell.

If opportunities for a normal life for the blind were to stagnate where we are today, the future would be bleak indeed—perhaps unbearable. But this is not the end. In fact, this is not even the end of the beginning, but it is the beginning of the beginning. I am absolutely certain that there are more and more blindness specialists with the "empowerment motive" who are ready and eager to work alongside the blind. For this reason—and also because of the vast body of knowledge which now exists about proper training—the future is bright with promise for blind Americans in the twenty-first century.

During the past sixty years, the blind of this nation have made enormous strides. As Dr. Jernigan (1997) pointed out in his speech, "THE DAY AFTER CIVIL RIGHTS," the blind have passed through three stages on their road to freedom and are currently in a fourth.

In the very early days, satisfying hunger was the order of the day for the Federation. The blind as a class were poor and without much hope for improvement. The organization spent a lot of time and energy working for more and better welfare and Social

Security benefits. When the blind were so hungry, it was impossible to devote much time or thought to anything else.

Then, in the second stage—during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s—getting jobs became the emphasis for the organized blind. A lot of work was done with vocational rehabilitation, and it also was during this period that much work was done on establishing orientation and adjustment centers and learning how to provide proper training for rank-and-file blind people. As present statistics indicate, not everyone got jobs, but a sound foundation for the future was laid.

As I near the end of this book, I can do no better than to quote extensively from Kenneth Jernigan's speech, "The Day After Civil Rights" (1997) to describe the third and fourth phases of progress and to talk about the future. Dr. Jernigan spoke and wrote eloquently, and his vision for the blind of America was profound, and right on target. In this memorable speech, he drafted the blueprint as to what the future can and should be for the blind. Working as partners with the blindness specialists of today and tomorrow, the Jernigan dream and vision will surely become a reality.

Among other things, he wrote:

And then we moved to a third stage. Call it civil rights. After a person has satisfied hunger and found a job, there is still something else—the search for self-esteem and equal treatment—the yearning to belong and participate—to be part of the family and the broader

community. And for us, as for other minorities, there was only one way to get there—confrontation. The status quo always fights change.

Many people think that civil rights and integration are the same thing. They aren't. The concept of civil rights precedes integration and is a necessary precursor to it. As used in the late twentieth century, the term civil rights (although some will deny it) always means force—an in-your-face attitude by the minority, laws that make somebody do this or that, picketing, marches in the street, court cases, and much else. And we have done those things, all of them. We had to.

But there comes a day after civil rights. There must. Otherwise, the first three stages (satisfying hunger, finding jobs, and getting civil rights) have been in vain. The laws, the court cases, the confrontations, the jobs, and even the satisfying of hunger can never be our prime focus. They are preliminary. It is not that they disappear. Rather, it is that they become a foundation on which to build.

Legislation cannot create understanding. Confrontation cannot create good will, mutual acceptance and respect. For that matter, legislation and confrontation cannot create self-esteem. The search for self-esteem begins in the period of civil rights, but the realization of self-esteem must wait for the day after civil rights.

It will be easy for me to be misunderstood, so I want to make something

very clear. We have not forgotten how to fight, and we will do it when we have to. We must not become slack or cease to be vigilant, and we won't. But we have now made enough progress to move to the next stage on the road to freedom. I call it the day after civil rights We must move beyond minority mentality and victim thinking. This will be difficult—especially in today's society, where hate and suspicion are a rising tide and where members of minorities are encouraged and expected to feel bitterness and alienation and members of the majority are encouraged and expected to feel guilt and preoccupation with the past. Yes, it will be hard to do what I am suggesting, but we must do it. We must be willing to give to others as much as we want others to give to us, and we must do it with good will and civility. We must make the hard choices and take the long view

If we want equal treatment and true integration, we must act like equals and not hide behind minority status. Yes, blind people are our brothers and sisters, but so are the sighted. Unless we are willing to have it that way, we neither deserve nor truly want what we have always claimed as a birthright.

That birthright, equal responsibility as well as equal rights, is the very essence of the NFB's philosophy. It is what we set out to get in 1940; it is what we have fought for every step of the way; it is what we are now close to achieving; and it is what we are absolutely determined to have. Equal rights—equal responsibility.

We are capable of working with the sighted, playing with the sighted, and living with the sighted; and we are capable of doing it on terms of complete equality. Likewise, the sighted are capable of doing the same with us—and for the most part, I think they want to. What we need is not confrontation but understanding, an understanding that runs both ways. This means an ongoing process of communication and public education.

These thoughtful and inspiring words have set the tone and charted the course for the blind of America for the foreseeable future. I and the other active members of the National Federation of the Blind invite blindness specialists with the empowerment motive to join with us and march at our side. We intend to take the long view, and we ask you to do likewise. The days of conflict and confrontation should be put behind us.

It is now an undeniable truth that blind people are normal people who given proper training and opportunity can do the average job in the average place of business and do it as well as their sighted neighbors. It is also undeniable that it does take proper training for the average blind person to achieve full empowerment and freedom. Finally, it is undeniable that the knowledge exists as to how to provide proper training.

It is by achieving full empowerment and freedom that blind people in ever increasing numbers will be able to enjoy the outcome of complete integration into society. And with complete integration will come the good will, mutual accep-

tance and respect which are longed for by all of humankind.

If it is true that the realization of self-esteem must wait for the day after civil rights, then it is time to put the era of civil rights behind us. We must endeavor now to achieve complete integration. The blind of America look forward to earned self-esteem and their birthright of equal rights and equal responsibilities.

The appalling and damning unemployment statistics must be challenged and replaced with more favorable ones. But the blind cannot make needed program and policy changes alone. The schools, the state agencies and the orientation and adjustment centers must be willing to do their share. And the blindness specialists must see themselves not merely as individuals with individual jobs and assignments but as parts of a larger picture—as integral parts of a team with a vision and a mission.

Whether we are director or maintenance man, counselor or teacher, orientation and mobility specialist or secretary—we are part of that larger picture providing the best and most meaningful services we can. It is my earnest hope that those of us now involved in work with the blind or who become involved in the future will be able to perceive ourselves as part of a team and as being integral to the objective of building a temple—of providing maximum empowerment and freedom for our blind customers. When we see ourselves in this light, we will naturally and permanently slip into the empowerment motive.

Empowerment is a powerful tool, and the blind who have the opportunity to achieve it will be unstoppable—they will be free. I look to the future with optimism and an absolute certainty that we are nearing that day when members of the organized blind movement and blindness specialists alike will capture Kenneth Jernigan's vision for the future and become true crusaders driven by a passion for justice for the blind. When this occurs, ever increasing numbers of rank-and-file blind people from across this land will realize true self-esteem and can say unequivocally, “I AM FREE! I KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE FREE!”

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REVIEWER COMMENTS

"Jim's memoirs and experiences enrich the presentation and illustrate the message. Life has taught him well. Now he seeks to share the freedom he has achieved with every blind person in America Mr. Omvig believes that the age of enlightenment in working with the blind is at hand. Let us hope and pray that he is right."

Alan Myklebust
Arizona School for the Blind

"My only concern is that it (the book) is not uninteresting and abstruse, so students may refuse to take it seriously. It is, however, about as serious and important as any book can be that deals with the possibility of giving blind people back their lives and dignity."

Barbara Pierce
Blind Consumer Advocate

"The assumption by Omvig that the public embraces and acts from the socially constructed misconceptions about blindness is what will be accepted or rejected by the readers of this book. This book is filled with common sense and wisdom. I would highly recommend it for anyone who lives with or works with blind people."

Ronald J. Ferguson
Louisiana Tech University

"The 'empowerment circle' and the importance of an organized consumer base is something that needs to be read and read again. This circle is a very powerful concept and can lend much to the changing of unemployment and underemployment, as well as a lack of literacy for the blind "

Ed Kunz
Texas Commission for the Blind

"Jim Omvig has captured the essence of successful rehabilitation of the blind in a thought-provoking work that challenges traditional values, roles, and practices of rehabilitation professionals It is a 'must read' for all rehabilitation professionals and practitioners."

Suzanne Mitchell
Louisiana Rehabilitation Services

"I have often lamented the absence of a basic philosophical work which could be used in staff training. Freedom for the Blind, at last, fills the gap that has existed...I enthusiastically recommend *Freedom for the Blind* by Jim Omvig as the most significant newly written material available to the blindness field."

Allen Harris
Iowa Department for the Blind

"Mr. Omvig's book is a clear, concise recipe for any private or public agency wishing to operate an effective orientation and adjustment center. If there is an RSA suggested reading list, this book should be at the top "

Vito J. DeSantis
New Jersey Commission for
the Blind and Visually Impaired

"Mr. Omvig's book makes a major contribution to the need to address attitudes of ALL people, those without disabilities and those with disabilities I recommend that this book be 'must' reading not only for professionals in the field of blindness but also for consumers, including parents, students and any of those who consider themselves to be advocates for persons who are blind This book will be a benchmark that will be used in all future writings on the topic."

Ralph E. Bartley
Kentucky School for the Blind

